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"TAKE YOUR CHOICE: LEAVE MY HOUSE PEACEFULLY, OR GO OUT HEADFOREMOST!"
CRIED THE RANCHER.

Big Benson's Bet;

OR,

RITA'S LAST LASSO THROW.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "ARIZONA ALF, THE MINER,"
"BLADE, THE SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DAUGHTER'S OATH.

"HOLD up your hand, Rita. There, that is right. Now swear to love no man until you have avenged our wrongs. Heaven will preserve *him* for your stroke. I feel it. Years may intervene between to-day and your hour of triumph, but, it will come. Swear to pay him for his crime. Swear in the sight of Heaven and by your dying mother to avenge your father's blood."

"I swear, mother! I will hate until I have accomplished my mission. Rita your child, will do her duty."

"I can go with cheerfulness now. I have raised you for this hour, my daughter. I knew you would not fail me."

"But you must live to see my triumph, mother. You shall—"

"No! no! When morning comes, Rita, you will be motherless."

The little girl called Rita, scarcely eight, but beautiful as a fairy, fell upon the bosom of the emaciated woman who lay on a rough pallet in a poor cabin on the banks of the Rio Pecos, and kissed her affectionately.

Night was fast closing in upon this scene.

Not far away murmured one of Texas's loveliest rivers, and from far beyond its banks came the long howl of the wolf.

Morning confirmed the mother's prophecy.

When the sun came up a little girl whose dark eyes swam in tears, stood in the narrow doorway looking toward the east.

Behind her on the pallet lay a dead woman, with the traces of a peaceful smile on her marble face, and two hands crossed on her bosom.

"Mother hoped that Romero would come before she died, but he is not here. Something keeps him."

Thus spoke Rita in audible tones while she watched toward the eastern horizon from the cabin door.

All at once she started visibly, and shaded her eyes with her hands while she continued to gaze.

A dark speck seemed to be moving toward her across the plain that stretched eastward from the river.

It possessed the motions of a rapidly galloping horse, and presently resolved itself into a swift steed whose saddle was filled with a man.

"It is Romero!" cried the little girl. "He comes too late to hear mother speak, but I can tell him all she said. Not one of her last words will ever leave me."

The horseman was not long in reaching the lonely cabin, and, drawing rein before the child, he sprung to the ground.

In person he was tall, well built, and had a swarthy face and piercing eyes of jet. His hat was a whitish sombrero with a silver band with fringe at the ends, and his leggings and jacket, the latter open in front, were rather fantastically braided after the manner of wealthy hacienda owners along the Mexican border.

His step was airy and graceful for a man who no doubt spent much of his time in the saddle, and he carried well his forty years.

"Waiting for me, Rita?" he asked, taking the child up in his arms and giving her a kiss before she could speak. "Where is that good mother of yours?"

Instead of bursting into a flood of tears the little one glided from the man's arms, and led him gently into the cabin.

An instant later he realized all.

"I have come too late—too late," he said stopping suddenly and fixing his gaze on the dead. "Why didn't I give Thunderbolt more spur? When did this happen, Rita?"

"Just before the morning broke!" answered the child. "I had watched all night and we both hoped that you would come."

"I should have been here. Why did I keep away?"

The man seemed to hate himself.

"Come, Romero, I do not blame you, and mother would not if she could speak," said Rita quickly. "I can tell you all she said. I can deliver the message she left for you."

"Then out with it, child! We will sit here while you deliver it."

The man cast himself upon the low stool beside the bed and took the girl upon his knee.

"Tell me everything, Rita," he went on. "You don't know how dear your mother was to Romero."

"In the first place, Romero, she made me swear that I would pay *him* back for that crime which cut the thread of mother's life."

"I knew she would do this. And you swore, child?"

"I did."

"I will help you keep that oath; nay, more, I will keep it for you."

"You shall not do that!" and the child's hand fell on the wild ranchero's arm. "I will keep my oath myself. Do not forget this, Romero. Then she gave me to you, my friend. If you had been here she would have placed my hand in yours and said: 'Take my child, Romero, and train her for the work she has before her.'"

"Won't I do that, though?" cried the man, his eyes gleaming with wild enthusiasm. "Your mother has given me a mission, too, Rita. I am to train you for your work. Ah! I know how to do that!"

The little girl then proceeded and in her childish way described her mother's death.

Not once was she interrupted by the bronzed Apollo of the Texan border, who eagerly drank in every word as it fell from her lips.

Whenever he glanced at the dead, his hands would close, and under his handsome black mustache he would clench his teeth.

"I don't know where he is, but we will find him!" he exclaimed at the conclusion of Rita's narrative. "It was the most fiendish murder that ever took place in this land. I will never

forget the night, Rita. I had ridden to your father's house to see him, but he was not at home. Your mother, who stood in the door waiting for him, greeted me with a smile and bade me welcome. We waited together. After some time we heard a horse coming toward the house. I knew Santa's gait, and your mother's eyes sparkled as she told me that her husband was coming. Two minutes later Santa halted before us, but the saddle was empty! Your mother gave one wild shriek as I sprung past her to the horse.

"She has since told you what I found, child—a lasso leading from Santa's saddle to the grass behind him, and at the end of that rope a dead man—your father! I stood there for a moment, thunderstruck. You were a babe then, asleep in your cradle behind the door. When I undid the rope and carried your father to the house, I found your mother calm. I laid the corpse before her and swore that Romero would take vengeance for the dead. I seemed beside myself. I knew it was no Apache job. In the midst of my wild oath your mother stopped me and with a quick glance at you, said: 'No more, Romero. I have a child for that work.' I let her have her way."

"I am glad you did, Romero," said the child. "You know that we have preserved the terrible witness of that night's work?"

"Yes, but I have not seen it for a long time."

Rita slid from Romero's knee and went to the head of the bed.

Stooping at the white face that pressed the pillow, she drew from beneath the bed-coverings a coil of rope, with which she came back to the rancher's side.

"This is it!" she exclaimed, holding the lasso up while her eyes flashed. "This is the rope father brought home that night. You used to say that you knew its owner, and mother knew him, too."

"I knew the miscreant!" shot Romero through clinched teeth, as he rose and clutched the lasso. "Gods! I would have noosed him with it long ago if you had not stood between me and justice, my child. I burned for revenge, but your mother always held me back and pointed to you. I will learn you how to cast the lasso. You will prove an apt scholar, I know. The border knows that I can cast the noose as well as I can shoot. I will make you my equal, Rita."

"I knew you would, Romero, for I have sworn in secret that this fatal rope shall throttle the devil who used it nearly eight years ago."

The lasso was returned to its place, and the man and child turned to perform the saddest duty of all.

We need not say that it was tenderly done.

The sun was setting on that eventful day in Rita Mayne's life, when a large, dark horse bearing two persons was halted in front of a somewhat stylish house for the locality.

It was the home of a well-to-do rancher, whose broad acres, dotted with herds, trended far away on every side.

The man who had guided the horse to the place, leaped upon the porch that ran the whole length of the house in front, and then lifted a child to the floor.

He left the steed and bore the little one into

the house, where he seated her in a chair that stood in the middle of a room, for the border, luxuriously furnished.

"You have never been here before, Rita," he said to her, with a smile. "This is Romero's home and yours, too. I am glad to share it with you—glad for your poor mother's sake."

"How kind you are, Romero; but I will not trouble you long. To-morrow I want you to teach me how to use the lasso I have brought along. Not for one moment am I going to forget the mission I have to perform. You will find me a willing pupil, and when you have taught me all, I will go out and find the man who made my mother a widow!"

CHAPTER II.

NINE YEARS AFTER.

"STAND from under! I'm ther only genuine an' original Brazos Bombshell, an' I hain't got an equal in the kentry. I kin chaw up any man what cau't chaw up me. I'm neither fur, fin ner feathers, but the world's only Big Burly Benson, ther Brazos Bombshell, an' when I explode thar's always somebody hurt."

It was nine years after the events described in the foregoing chapter that the language just recorded fell from the lips of a man who would have commanded attention anywhere and in any kind of a crowd.

He stood in the middle of a ring which had been formed by a number of wild-looking men, among whom was a fair sprinkling of New-Mexicans.

A few rough-looking cabins visible here and there made up what was known as Coyote City, on the edge of the *Llano Estacado*, or Staked Plains.

The man himself was a striking specimen of the border athlete, a little more than six feet in height, with wonderful broad shoulders, and powerful arms.

His face was the darkest seen there at that time, and the mass of raven hair that touched his shoulders lent it a hue still swarthier.

He wore no hat, that article of head-gear, a well-worn sombrero, lay at his feet; he was dressed only in a heavy dark brown shirt and buckskin pants, the lower ends of which were hid below the capacious tops of his boots.

The belt that girt his waist carried his armament, two heavy revolvers, one on each hip, and a bowie whose buck-horn handle suggested a great length of blade.

"I'm not exactly sp'ilin' for a fight," he went on, seeing that nobody answered his first outburst. "But I'm proud to inform Coyote City thet I never refuse ter accommodate the man what wants one. Yes, sir; I'm the only Burly Benson in Uncle Samuel's corral, an' when I take a notion ter pass in my checks, ez I may do some day, thar'll never be another. I've fought Injuns an' grizzlies from Californy to ther Wichita; I've opened Mexicans all over Greaserdom, an' I've knifed, shot, whipped an' lassoed from Oregon to the Rio Pecos! I'm a bombshell with less than a two-second fuse, an' when you fool with me you fool with sart'in death! Who'll walk inter ther ring to-night! Ther fuso is ready, gentlemen, an' I'd jest ez soon hev somebody tech it off ez not."

The listeners exchanged glances and a few smiled; but no one offered to accept the desperado's challenge.

In truth, they knew the man.

All along the wild Texan border of a few years ago everybody knew Burly Benson.

He had a name for courage and daring that put to shame the deeds of the most noted border heroes.

It was a habit of his to alight suddenly in a town, and with a wild whoop attack the populace which he would challenge *en masse* for a fight.

Not the border towns alone would be thus visited, but the very strongholds of the red skins.

There were well-authenticated stories of his dare-devil acts in the villages of the Apaches and Comanches, where he had appeared like a flash and whipped in the twinkling of an eye the most powerful chiefs the tribes could produce.

He was tolerated along the border because of his recklessness and great strength.

Nobody dared to meet him hand to hand, and with knife, lasso and revolver he was everybody's superior.

For two years prior to the present visit Coyote City had not seen the Brazos Bombshell.

He had been heard of in other places, now compelling some New Mexican stock-raiser to surrender up his best horse, and now coming out best in a human "shooting-match" away up on the Colorado.

Big Benson was migratory, and wherever he went he was pretty certain to spill blood, or tighten a lasso.

Coyote City had never taken kindly to him, not that its people were any too refined to tolerate his company; but they hated to have to be cowed by one who seemed to find pleasure in lording it over his fellow-men as the prince of deadly weapons along the Texas border.

"Nobody hyer ter accommodate me, eh?" continued Big Benson, addressing the crowd that surrounded him in Coyote City. "Then mebbe I'd better move on to whar I kin git exercise."

He picked up his hat and balancing it on one of his bronze fingers sent it spinning around with the other hand.

"I'll find some wolves that'll fight afore I git to Laredo, mebbe!" he said suddenly. "I've got myself worked up to such a pitch that I must hev a tussle. Why don't somebody say that ther Brazos Bombshell is filled with wet powder? I'm nearly sp'ilin' fer some scrub ter make that kind ov a remark. I'd just like to chaw 'im up an' then sit down on 'im till his mother wouldn't know 'im, I would, by jingo!"

Big Benson threw around upon the crowd a look of disgust as he stopped twirling the hat and crushed it upon his head.

"Good-night, boys! When I come ag'in just let me explode in genuine style. Two weeks ago the Brazos Bombshell walked inter ther big Apache village an' shook old Boiling Water till he thought a grizzly had 'im. Oh, I'm liable to go off any time. When I git to Laredo, t'other side the plains, I'll create a sensation in Greaserdom. I hev'n't met a high-toned Greaser fer six months."

The crowd made way for the terror of the border and he passed through it whistling a defiant air.

More than one hand crept instinctively to leathern belts, and fire flashed from fifty eyes; but that was all.

Not a revolver was drawn, and not a hand lifted against the desperado.

"Big Benson thrilled me as I was never thrilled before," said a young man looking up into the face of the person who stood at his side, a person almost the Bombshell's equal in physique.

"Thrilled you?—how, Dasher?"

"I can hardly explain, but do you not remember what he said about lassoing men from Oregon to the Rio Pecos?"

"I do, but what of it?"

"It went through me like a knife—that boast."

"Why should it, Dasher? I suspect that Benson told the truth, for if he hasn't lassoed as many men as he has horses, then I miss my guess."

"And he is permitted to live?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to ask him a question."

"What about?"

"About a certain man who was lassoed in the Rio Pecos country once."

"Don't. Keep that question to yourself, Dasher. Don't interfere with what may be one of the Bombshell's secrets. When you fool with him you fool with powder. He's going to begin a journey to-night which I wouldn't undertake alone, and I claim to have some grit."

"Oh, yes; he said he was going to Laredo."

"Across the *Llano Estacado*. It is a death journey, but nobody knows that better than the Brazos Bombshell."

"Which road will he take?"

"The most dangerous one you may be sure; that's his custom."

"The Southern trail, then?"

"Of course. But, look here. Don't you try to find out anything about the man lassoed on the Rio Pecos, not from him at any rate. Let him go. Coyote City was confounded lucky to get rid of him without losing any of her citizens. Don't make yourself his victim, Dasher. That's one who would advise you as I have done if she were here."

The youth called Dasher was not more than nineteen. His physique was faultless, and his face was quite handsome with its ruddy complexion and deep-blue eyes.

Those eyes had followed Big Burly Benson almost to the confines of Coyote City and had quitted his form with regret.

"What's that Captain Monte has just told me? I must not fool with the Bombshell because it has, according to its own boast, a two-second fuse? Why didn't Benson keep certain things to himself to-night, then? Why did he boast that he had lassoed men from Oregon to the Rio Pecos? I'm going to ask him a question. I don't care if my question sets the fuse on fire."

Dasher hurried away and saddled a horse which he took from the corral at the edge of the town.

Coyote City was, as we have said, on the edge of the *Llano Estacado*.

Across the vast stretch of dangerous soil stood Laredo, the New Mexican village toward which the Bombshell had proceeded.

To meet Big Benson beyond the border town was Dasher's desire, and his steed bore him swiftly away.

The youth knew the southerly trail; he had traversed it once with a number of companions, and he knew, too, where grew the only clump of trees between Coyote City and the end of the first twenty miles.

He urged his horse toward this place, and twenty minutes after leaving the Texan town, he drew rein under the boughs.

An examination of the trail told him that Burly Benson had not passed the spot, and turning his horse's head toward Coyote, Dasher waited for his prey.

Ten minutes had not elapsed before he heard the rapid gallop of a horse.

"The Bombshell comes," he said. "If Monte were here he'd see me light the fuse."

With eagerness and determination depicted on his countenance, Dasher waited for his man.

At last he saw the approaching horse, and then the burly figure that rose above the Mexican saddle,

The Brazos Bombshell soon reached the trees.

"Halt, Brazos!"

Instantly the desperado reined in his steed, and his revolver clicked as he leaned forward.

"Ho! a boy!" he exclaimed. "Do you want an escort ter Laredo?"

"No," said Dasher.

"Then don't light the fuse ov this bombshell, but git out ov ther road."

"When I have transacted my business with you, Brazos, not before," was the quick reply. "I am here to ask you a question."

"Mebbe you'd better not. I'm not gentle ez a woman to-night. Coyote City backed down an' I'm r'iled yet. But go on."

"I will. You said back there that you have lassoed men from Oregon to the Rio Pecos. Why did you name that river?"

"Because I did my best noose-throwin' thar!"

Dasher started.

"Then do you know who lassoed Major Marion Mayne?"

There was no reply to the question for a moment.

Dasher fancied that Big Benson's eyes caught the glitter of the stars that studded the heavens above.

"Ho! ho! what ef I do know, boy?" he suddenly cried. "Warn't it a good job? That's a funny question from you. What's yer name?"

"Dasher."

"Whar from?"

"Coyote."

The eyes of the Brazos Bombshell regarded Dasher intensely.

"Then go back to Coyote an' don't fool with jumpin' lightnin', which is me!"

"But *you* lassoed Major Mayne?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I know already. You can go to Laredo."

Dasher pulled his steed to one side.

"Look hyer, youngster," and Big Benson leaned toward the youth with cocked revolver. "You've smoothed this tiger the wrong way. You hev put a match to ther fuse. No man stops the Brazos Bombshell an' lives. What war thet Texan majo to you?"

"Time will tell!" was the reply. "You lassoed him—that's all I want to know. One of the days the Brazos Bombshell will burst for good. It has been sworn that your neck shall be encircled by the noose that strangled him. That noose is ready now!"

A strange cry burst from the Bombshell's throat, and the next instant he was listening to the hoof-beats of Dasher's horse on the way to Coyote.

CHAPTER III.

THE COMANCHES' SWOOP.

A BEAUTIFUL day-dawn on the Texas plains.

Not a cloud mars the serenity of the morning sky, and the air is fresh and filled with the scent of wild yellow flowers.

Across the plain rides a young horseman who is continually urging his steed to greater speed as if desirous of reaching a certain goal within a given time.

The horse and his rider give evidences of having traveled the greater part of the night just past.

"On, a little further on, and we will rest," says the person in the saddle. "I am the bearer of glorious news to her! I have made a discovery that will make her eyes flash, and send the blood hot as boiling oil through her veins. He is found at last! Gods! I wish I could make *you* understand this, horse; then you would go like the wind, and we should be there in thirty minutes more."

Thus speaks the rider to his horse as the hoofs crush the golden blossoms to the earth, and chase away the first bees that have sought them.

All at once the young man starts and fixes his eye on several dark specks that move along the sky far away.

"I wonder what attracts the carrion-birds in this part of the country?" he exclaims. "I never saw them gather so fast before. There must be a feast for them somewhere on the plain. The air will be dark with pinions ere long; but thank Heaven, you, Rita, are safe on Romero's ranch."

The speaker keeps his eye fixed on the hundreds of birds that sail and swoop some distance ahead.

His horse is rapidly carrying him to the spot where death has spread a disgusting banquet for the scavengers of the air.

"Can it be that they hover over the old ranch? I will not believe it!" and he strikes his horse with spurs already bloody, and is borne forward as if lashed to a monster rocket.

From the summit of a pretty rise he catches sight of a house partly shaded by a number of stately trees.

Above it circle the birds he has watched for a long time. There are hundreds of them, and hundreds of them have settled in a rich pasture just beyond the dwelling.

"My God! what brings the vultures to Ro-

mero's ranch?" bursts from the young rider's lips. "In the name of Heaven, what has happened here?"

Down the hill flies the foaming steed to be reined in at the porch that extends the full length of the house in front, and the youth leaps from the saddle.

A single bound carries him beyond the door that stands open, but he halts in the room which he gains.

"Romero! Romero! where are you, senor?" he cries.

The echo of his own words is his only answer.

Everything in the room is in a topsy-turvy condition; it looks as though a tornado had passed through it.

The tables have been broken, chairs crushed, and pictures ripped from their frames and cut to pieces.

There is not one whole article of furniture in the room.

The young rider rushes into another apartment; he seems to know something about the interior of this ranch home.

The scene that greets him in the next chamber is similar to the one just left—everything destructible has been cut to pieces.

He shuts his teeth hard and mutters an oath of vengeance, as he jerks open a door and springs up a stair, covering three steps at a time.

"Rita, Rita! If the devils have harmed you, woe to them!" he exclaimed.

He opens a door at the head of the flight, and with blanched cheeks looks into a room.

A glance would tell any one that it is a lady's boudoir; but what a sight greets the young man's eyes!

The elegant dressing-stand lies on the floor, literally hacked to pieces, the mirror has been shattered, and the dainty couch broken up. The lace curtains of the windows have been torn down and jerked into threads, and knives have ripped up the lovely carpet designed only for woman's tread.

The youth surveys all this with eyes that fairly blaze with rage.

"I have come too late! Rita, they have carried you off. Romero should have known that his home was a rich prize for the greedy Comanche. I always feared that this day would come. And to think that it came before I could announce to Rita my important discovery! It is too bad! Woe to you, infernal red-skins, for this devilish swoop! I will wrench Rita from your grasp; I will free Romero if he still lives! You have paved the way to a day of wrath and vengeance, for I have sworn that Rita should find the man who lassoed her father on the banks of the Rio Pecos. Vengeance for this raid first!"

Need we say that the speaker was Dasher?

All night he had galloped from the spot where he had met the Brazos Bombshell on his way to Loreda across the Staked Plains.

He had given his horse no rest, and yet he reached the hacienda, or ranch, too late to be of service to its inmates, our old acquaintances Rita and Romero.

The condition of the appointments of the

house told him that he stood on the scene of a Comanche raid.

Those red Arabs of the Southwest seldom spared anything belonging to a person whom they hated as it was known they hated Romero the rancher.

It was a wonder that they had not given the buildings to the flames.

"By Heaven! the red wolves shall pay for this!" grated Dasher, leaving the house. "Of course, they carried off the horses, but it will do no harm to look."

He went to the stables wherein Romero always locked his blooded stock at night to keep it safe from the red raiders.

A wire calculated to sound an alarm ran from the stables to the house, but it had been discovered and cut.

Dasher threw open the doors, to be greeted by a horrid stench that almost overpowered him.

The horses had not been taken, but lay in their stalls with their throats cut.

Dasher did not pause a moment there, but made to the pasture-grounds, frightening scores of vultures by his approach.

He met the very sight he expected to see.

Hundreds of choice cattle had been wantonly butchered by the revengeful demons; the poor beasts lay everywhere, a sickening sight, and one that appealed for vengeance.

Dasher looked a minute and then galloped back to the house.

He reined in his steed before the porch again, and was about to dismount when a horseman rapidly approaching from the south met his eye.

"My God! it is Romero!" burst from his lips. "Can it be that he knows nothing of all this?"

Keeping his eye on the approaching horseman whom he awaited at the porch, Dasher tried to frame a suitable welcome, but he could not.

The swift rider was Romero, the rancher, not exactly the same man whom we saw take care of little Rita nine years before, but a person with a gray mustache and many whitening threads among his long locks.

Then his hair was as dark as the raven's plumage, now it was thickly sprinkled with gray.

But his figure was as erect as usual, and his eye keen as the eagle's.

He fixed his gaze on Dasher as he came on and halted beside him at the porch.

"Heavens! They came at last, did they?" he said. "I have been to La Lornita. Rita, Rita, where are you?"

He sprung across the porch, and entered the house.

Dasher heard a mad oath escape his lips; then a person went up the stair.

The youth waited ten minutes for Romero's return, but he did not come.

Not a sound came from the house.

"I'll go to him if he will not come to me!" cried Dasher, springing from the saddle.

He bounded up the steps again, and entered the desolated boudoir, but shrunk back with a sharp cry.

Amid the ruins of Rita's little room sat

Romero with his head between his hands, overwhelmed.

The full extent of the Comanche raid had not burst upon him until he discovered that Rita was missing; Rita, the little one whom he had taken from a dead mother's bosom, and loved and trained for vengeance.

He seemed unconscious of Dasher's presence; the youth's exclamation had not startled him.

Dasher retreated to the threshold, but stood respectful there, waiting for the crushed rancher to recover.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes passed away, but Romero did not stir.

"I can't wait here for all time," cried the impatient youth. "I have work to do. If he is not dead, I will bring him to his senses."

He stepped forward and laid his hand on the rancher's shoulder.

At the touch Romero leaped up as if stung by a serpent.

His countenance was horrible to look upon.

It was entirely colorless, and his eyes possessed the wild stare seen sometimes in the eyes of the mad.

"Rita is gone, Romero," said Dasher; "but she is not lost. Remain here and wait for me. I know but two words now—*rescue* and *vengeance*!"

Romero sprung forward and seized Dasher's hands.

"I trust you, boy!" he cried. "Rita, my Rita, has been carried off by the Comanches just when I was about to send her on that trail she has yearned to travel. It has been found at last—at last, Dasher. My God! I am weak as a child. Ah! this accursed blow! Go, Dasher. I exact no oath from you. You will find Rita! You will restore her to my arms; you will help her avenge the past."

"I will! I will! I swear it, Romero!"

The youth disengaged himself from the rancher's grasp, and sprung down the stair.

A wild spring carried him across the porch, a leap settled him in the saddle, and with a thrilling cheer that must have startled the grief-stricken man in the room above, he gave his horse the crimson spur.

The next instant he was flying from the house, swearing anew that he would wrest Rita from the clutches of the Comanches.

CHAPTER IV.

KEEPING HIS PROMISE.

"I'm back again, ther same old magazine thet left hyer fer Loredó about two weeks ago. Had a time since? Bet yer hats! Them Greasers touched the fuse off, an' yer ought ter hev seen ther old shell explode! They'll not hev sech a time ag'in in Loredó till I go back. Whoop! I'm ther Brazos Bombshell, achin' to be trod on. Whar's ther boy?"

Big Benson surveyed from the back of a magnificent cream-colored steed the crowd of bronzed men by whom he was surrounded.

He had come back to Coyote as big as life, and in his own language, "sp'ilin' for a fight."

"Don't none of ye know whar thet boy is?" he continued. "I mean ther chap what stopped me on ther road ter Loredó. I want ter inter-

view him, want ter tell 'im thet I'm ther p'lsonous individual in Texas. Ain't he hyer?"

"If yon mean Dasher," said Captain Monte, "he isn't in Coyote just now."

"Dasher! That's his orthodox handle, is it? He's somewhat ov a dasher, too, strikes me. Whar is he?"

"I don't know."

"Mebbe I'll find 'im movin' around. Ef he comes back hyer afore I do jest tell 'im thet I'm filled with dry powder an' thet I've cut the fuse to a half-second length. Blame me! ef I'm goin' to be stepped on by a boy; no, siree! not while I'm the only genuine an' original Brazos Bombshell. I'm no sham. Men, alligators and grizzlies, know thet I'm worse than jumpin' lightnin' when I'm r'iled. Dasher, eh? Wal, I'm a smasher, I am. Move on, Comet."

The crowd gave way as it always did when the Texan desperado wanted to proceed, and he left Coyote singing a wild song in a voice totally devoid of any melody.

Captain Monte, the best friend young Dasher had, watched the Bombshell for a few moments.

"The boy did just what I told him not to do—he stopped Big Benson," he said to himself. "Now, if they meet there'll be a tragedy. Why don't somebody rid the border of that villain? He's been having it all his own way long enough. Why don't you do it, Monte? Men used to call you brave: you used to fight duels in Colorado Camp years ago. Have you lost your grit?"

Monte of Coyote started at his own question.

Big Benson had passed from sight, for the night had fallen again, although the sky looked like a diamond-field.

Monte did not claim to be in any sense of the word Dasher's guardian. A strong friendship existed between the two. Nobody knew how it had commenced, but all Coyote was certain that nothing less than death would end it.

After a minute's silent study, Monte mounted a horse, armed himself with two pistols and a Coyoter's inseparable adjunct when in the saddle, a lasso, and rode slowly from the town.

If the people feared the Bombshell while in the place, there was one, at least, who did not fear to follow him out upon the boundless plains.

"To protect Dasher—that's my mission," was all Monte said as he rode away.

Dasher! Where was the boy?

Near the close of a fair day nearly a week after his swift departure from the desolated ranch of Romero, a youth might have been seen leading a horse up a narrow trail that wound round a hill in the country of the Comanches.

The sloping sides of the rise were well wooded, but the trail, an Indian foot-path, was quite easily followed, and the youth at last reached a point from whence he could look down into the valley that lay below.

Dasher—for the crawler was Coyote's youngest citizen—knew that he was near the great camp of the Comanches, that he could, from the spot he had just reached, look down into the camp of the red eagles who had swooped down upon Romero's ranch, destroying everything destructible excepting the house itself.

If he was young he could trail, and the track of the destroying demons had been followed from the doors of the rancher's dwelling.

"At last!" exclaimed Dasher in tones of triumph as he gazed down upon the tepees of the red-skins. "Romero is waiting for Rita in the old home, and I have sworn to fetch her back. I am here to do my duty."

The Comanche camp lay at his feet. He had never seen it before, but he knew that it was lorded over by Red Crest, one of the fiercest and bravest war chiefs of the Centaur Nation.

But why did Dasher start immediately after his first glance downward? The whole village seemed to be in commotion as he could see in the few minutes of daylight still left.

Scores of mounted Indians met his eye, and each was armed only with the lasso which the Comanche knows how to use so well.

But Dasher saw more than Comanche braves. He saw a sylph-like figure that occupied a horse in a group of chiefs—Rita!

She was not bound; her limbs were free and their movements unimpeded.

What did it mean?

"They've made her a queen of their tribe, maybe!" ejaculated Dasher. "Rita, the White Queen of the Comanches! How would that sound?"

While Dasher looked he saw the Comanches form a mounted gantlet line some forty feet wide. It extended the whole length of the village more than a mile long.

All at once a yell from the westernmost end of the gantlet startled Dasher and he caught sight of a horse riderless and unbridled rushing down the line.

Suddenly a young Comanche followed him, a lasso in his right hand.

"They're having some amusement, that's all," said Dasher, watching the Indian. "By Jove! I'd like to show them what I can do with the noose!"

He saw the noose leave the Indian's hand as he chased the unbroken horse down the line toward him, and an exclamation of admiration broke from his lips as it settled over the animal's head.

Shouts of applause rewarded the young buck for his victory; the captured horse was taken back with triumph, and the operation repeated.

"They are going to let Rita fling the rope!" Dasher suddenly exclaimed. "Gods! I wish I could let her know that I am here."

His desire to acquaint the girl of his nearness almost drove him to his feet, but he restrained himself, and prepared for an emergency.

He saw Red Crest lead Rita's horse to the end of the line from whence the lassoer had ridden after their victims.

She uncoiled the rope at her saddle-bow, and waited for the signal.

Rita was far away, more than a mile, but Dasher's keen eyes noted every move.

Suddenly a shout from the Comanche's throat announced the trial of skill.

A second later there burst into view beyond the gantlet a splendid coal-black horse, whose limbs denoted symmetry and strength.

Rita was seen to watch him narrowly as he came on.

All at once he passed her like a rocket.

Red Crest shouted again, and the black horse had a pursuer.

For Dasher it was a sight that made his blood tingle with excitement.

His elevated position showed him all. Down the line came Rita and the wild steed, the latter trying to escape the lasso which the fair girl held.

Suddenly, when in the center of the line, Rita rose in her stirrup, and the lasso circled about her head.

"Make a good throw, girl!" cried Dasher. "You will have to lasso more than a horse by and by!"

The lasso left the girl's hand, and shot after the careering steed.

Dasher held his breath.

Even from his position he saw the black noose hover over the wild victim's head for a second, and then drop down upon his ample shoulders!

As the lasso struck, Rita's horse planted his fore-feet in the earth, and the insnared black was brought to his haunches in the twinkling of an eye!

A yell that made the welkin ring applauded the girl's victory, but the next instant a shout of a different kind was heard.

Rita's horse was holding his prey no longer, but was bearing his rider like a cannon-ball on down the Indian lane.

Dasher sprang up and threw himself upon the back of his horse.

"It is my chance! Rita has made a break for liberty. She shall succeed!"

The Indians did not fully realize the girl's actions until she shot from the living lane with a look that proclaimed her purpose!

She was beyond the gantlet in a second, riding like a queen of the saddle, and so fast that her horse's feet hardly seemed to touch the ground.

Dasher saw that if Rita kept the course that lay directly before her she would skirt the base of the hill which concealed him.

"I'll help her now. They have started in pursuit!" he muttered.

Roused by Rita's look and onward ride the Comanches were swarming after her, headed by no less a chief than Red Crest, whose powerful horse had unhorsed a dozen chiefs ere he gained the head of the chase.

The girl did not look back; she knew that they were behind her.

Dasher turned his steed's head toward the bottom of the hill and gave him the spur.

Down he went at a perilous gait, plunging here and there almost on his head, but managed to keep his feet.

"Heaven, let me get between Rita and those red devils!" he exclaimed. "I have found the man she has sworn to run to earth. Let her live to pay him for his brutal cast in the Rio Pecos!"

The distance between Rita and the yelling Comanches when she reached the foot of the hill was not great, not more than sixty yards.

All at once Dasher, standing upright in his stirrups, dashed into this shortening space.

The Indians saw him the moment he struck the trail.

"I am here for Rita!" rung from his lips in trumpet tones, and wheeling upon the red Centaurs as he guided his steed after the girl, he began to empty two revolvers into their faces.

He played the border weapons with a quickness that would have startled an expert, and with his face turned upon the enemy he shot to kill, and kill he did.

More than one Comanche blanket lost its owner during the next two minutes, and when Dasher turned toward Rita he had lengthened those sixty yards into six hundred!

His horse bore him rapidly toward Romero's ward, who had slackened the speed of her racer and a cry of joy burst from his as he came alongside.

"Dasher! Thank Heaven!" cried the girl. "I recognized the voice of your pistols. Where have you been so long?"

"Looking for your father's foe. And I have found him, Rita!"

The girl almost stopped her horse.

"I thank you, Dasher; but I wish you had let me find him," she said.

"My discovery was accidental. He gave himself away."

"What does he call himself now?"

"Big Burly Benson, the Brazos Bombshell."

"Is *he* the man?" cried the girl, turning to Dasher an astonished countenance. "What will Romero say when he knows that?"

"He already knows it."

"It must have astonished him. But we must outwit the Comanches. They will give us a long chase. Red Crest does not relinquish a captive tamely. After escape, then for Big Benson."

"No, the old ranch first."

"Well, have your own way," smiled Rita.

"If Big Benson is the man he was doomed nine years ago." Dasher did not reply for the Comanches were close behind them.

The chase was not yet at an end.

CHAPTER V.

COWED.

ROMERO the rancher stood on his porch with an anxious face turned toward the west.

"The boy should be here by this time. He has had time to find Red Crest and his captive. Ah! maybe the Indians have played the best hand. I forget that Dasher is a mere boy, not so well up to Comanche cunning as his elders. I may have to take the trail yet. If I do, woe to you, Red Crest, for the blow you dealt me and mine while I was absent.

There was fire in the depths of Romero's eyes, and he began to pace the porch with mad strides.

Although nine years had passed since he had carried Rita, a child, from the grave of her mother, his eyes had not become dimmed, nor his well-knit frame lost one iota of strength or agility.

He could still lasso the wildest horse that crossed the Texan plains, and fill a saddle with the ease that characterized his youth.

Well might he grind his teeth and curse the war-chief of the Comanches.

We have seen what Red Crest had done, invaded his ranch, demolished his furniture, killed his blooded stock, and, worse than all, carried off Rita.

It was enough to make Romero's eyes flash, and send him back and forth over the porch muttering of vengeance.

All at once he sent an eagle glance across the stretch of rich pasturage that lay before him toward the southwest.

No herds there now, no coal-black stallions, his favorite color, rushing with arched neck and gleaming eyes through the luxuriant grass.

"Curse them! curse them forever!" he broke forth, clinching his hands. "I will wait no longer! I will show Red Crest and his red raiders that Romero is a demon of revenge."

He was turning back into the house when he stopped abruptly, and fixed his eyes on an object which had suddenly come in sight.

"At last! Dasher comes, but by heavens! he is alone!"

Romero's keen eyes had told him that the approaching object was a horseman, and that he was heading for the house which he had doubtless seen.

Advancing to the edge of the porch, the rancher continued to regard the horseman, still believing that it was Dasher returning without the Comanche's captive.

"It is not Dasher!" he exclaimed, as the man urged his horse over the pasture-field. "Great God! it is Big Benson."

The identity of his soon-to-be-guest was now established, and from that moment Romero regarded the man with a scowl that darkened his face.

He did not desert his post until the Brazos Bombshell reined in his steed not five feet away, and bade him the time in his sonorous tones.

It was evident that the two men had met before, although the acquaintanceship was not of that kind which produces friends.

"Heard the red Greasers had paid ye a visit, an' thought I'd call an' squint at ther damage," said the desperado. "By Jehosopha! but I'd like ter explode among 'em. I'm ther only Brazos Bombshell, in first-class condition. I'm as p'isen as I used ter be, Romero. What did ther skunks do?"

Romero grated his teeth before he spoke.

"They struck me pretty hard," he said.

"An' ye'r' goin' ter strike back with interest, eh? Draw on me. I'm sp'ilin' fer a fight—jest dyin' ter be tramped on by a Comanche. Red Crest's work, eh? Wal, he knows ther Bombshell. I caught 'im by the throat once an' shook his moccasins off. I haven't seen you fer years, Romero, but I'm yer pard in this settlement if ye say ther word. Yon an' me would make a team thet would make Texas feel proud. What d' yer say?" And the Bombshell leaped from his horse and landed on the porch in front of Romero, upon whose shoulder his dark hand fell as he finished.

The rancher recoiled from the touch as if a viper had touched his hand, and the eyes of the two men met.

Burly Benson was the rancher's superior in strength, but not in courage.

"I never asked any man to help me," said Romero. "What I cannot do alone shall be left undone."

"Don't want a pard, then? Won't take me, eh?" was the retort which made the speaker's eyes flash. "I've come to the wrong man. I thought from what I've heard thet jest now Romero wanted a pard."

"I want none."

"All right. I beg pardon fer disturbin' ye. They didn't tech yer ward, did they? I heard—"

A stride carried Romero to the edge of the porch from which Big Benson was about to remount his horse.

"Come and see," he said. "I will show you what they did."

"I'll do thet, Romero." And the Brazos Bombshell followed the rancher into the house.

Romero showed him first the rooms below still littered with broken furniture, not one piece of which had been disturbed since the Comanches' departure.

Benson burst into explosions of rage in each room, and cursed the red raiders in a voice that might have been heard in the wide pasture-fields beyond the house.

With a curious light in his eyes the rancher led his guest up-stairs and suddenly threw open the door of Rita's boudoir.

"The bird's nest, eh?" instantly exclaimed the Bombshell, pausing on the threshold. "Say ther word, Romero, an' ther Brazos Bombshell will burst right in the Comanche camp. They didn't spare your ward a chair. Heavens! They struck you hard."

A quick stride carried Romero to one corner of the room and stooping over a lot of wrecked furniture he drew forth something which he whirled upon the Texan.

"They overlooked this!" he exclaimed, holding out for Big Benson's inspection a black lasso whose length seemed extraordinary from its copious coil.

From the first sight of the lasso the eyes of the Bombshell became fixed upon it.

Romero's orbs seemed to laugh while they regarded him.

"They left thet lasso, did they?" suddenly said the big ruffian. "It used ter be ther best coil ov rope in Texas!"

"What!" exclaimed the rancher. "Do you recognize it?"

"Wal, I reckon I do! Many's ther time I've swung ther noose ov thet cord over my head. Whar did you git it?"

"I found it."

"Whar?"

Romero's eyes glittered.

"In the Rio Pecos country. Did you lose it there?"

"Wal, I reckon."

"Was it carried off by a horse?"

"In one sense ov the word it war. Queer thet you should find it, an' thet Red Crest's sharp peepers should overlook the best lasso in Texas. Don't I long ter throw ther old noose ag'in, though? My fingers itch ter cast it once more. Let me feel it in my hands ag'in, Romero," and Big Benson put forth one hand for the lasso, but

the next second it was flung over the rancher's shoulder, and fell in the corner from whence it had just been taken.

The Brazos Bombshell shot Romero a mad look.

"What does thet mean?" he said.

"That the lasso remains here."

"It's mine."

"It is not. It belongs to one who has a better claim on it than he who lost it years ago."

"Romero," said Benson, trying to beat down his anger, "you must not forget who I am."

"Nor what you were, *then!*" was the quick response, as the eyes of the rancher returned the Bombshell's look with interest.

Big Benson's right foot glided toward Romero, and he threw a look at the lasso which seemed to precede a spring for its recovery.

"I'll take thet rope, ef you please," he said. "Ther Brazos Bombshell is in ther habit ov takin' his property wherever he finds it. Therefore, Romero, I'll thank ye fur that noose."

The insulting manner in which the bully spoke sent the rancher's blood boiling through his veins.

"The rope stays where it is. Neither you nor any man can have it."

Quick as a flash Benson's hand shot toward his belt, and as he stepped nearer Romero, he whipped out a revolver.

"My lasso! I'm worse than a thousand grizzlies when I'm stirred up. Ther Brazos Bombshell is ready to explode. You touched off ther fuse, Romero. My noose, er yer life!"

Not an inch moved the man in whose heart there was no fear for any human being.

The blazing eyes of the Bombshell did not make the rancher quail.

"You want your rope—I say you can't have it!" re-echoed Romero, in determined tones.

"You may terrorize Coyote, but there stands before you one who fears you not. I wouldn't shed a drop of your blood for all Texas."

"Why not?" roared the desperado.

"Because it is not for me to shed it. The lasso that lies behind me you can't have just now. The time is not far distant when it will be restored to you!"

"I want it *now!*"

The next instant Romero's hands struck the Bombshell's shoulders, and he was forced across the threshold of Rita's room before he could resist in the least.

The rancher was a giant in strength, and he backed his burly visitor to the head of the stairs.

"Take your choice: leave my house peaceably, or go out head-foremost!" he cried. "I won't fight you. I don't want your help to find Rita. She'll find you one of these days, maybe. Go!"

He seemed to read the lassoer's thoughts, for he relaxed his grip.

"I'm goin', Romero, but not for good!" he cried. "You've stepped on ther Bombshell. You've burned ther fuse almost to ther powder. Thet rope I'll hev if it costs me my life."

"Can't you wait?" scornfully smiled the rancher. "You'll get it before long."

There was no reply, and glaring at the man who stood firmly between him and the coveted prize, the baffled Texan went sullenly down the steps.

Stalking across the porch, he threw himself into the saddle, and shook his fist at the house.

"No peace between us, Romero!" he exclaimed. "I'll hev more than that lasso. I'll hev revenge an' yer ward besides. In spite ov all I told you, you forget that I am ther Brazos Bombshell."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE SADDLE.

NIGHT was falling over the Texan's hacienda when Big Benson galloped from the porch.

He went through the pasture like a charging cavalryman, nor drew rein until he reached the bank of a small stream some miles beyond.

"Thar's one man in Texas what won't scare worth a cent," he said aloud to himself. "I found that out to-night. He talked as if he knew who I used that lasso on last; but how could he? An' what do I care ef he does know? Meta wouldn't smile on Burly Benson when he made love to her fairly, but took up with the major. I told her that I could lasso a man as well as a horse, an' didn't I prove it to her sorrow? It war nine years ago. I wonder what ever became ov ther widow an' her kid? The gal ought to be a full blossom now, an' ef she looks like her mother used ter, she's a daisy."

The murmur of the Texan stream was the only noise that fell upon the desperado's ears.

It flowed around his horse's feet, for he had permitted the steed to quench his thirst and cool his limbs.

Beyond the stream, as behind him, lay some level country, over which the night was falling, but objects could still be distinguished at a goodly distance.

When the horse had slaked his thirst, the Bombshell guided him across the stream, and went on his way.

Not far behind him rode a man who seemed to be on his trail.

It was not Romero, nor Dasher, but one who was known in Coyote as Captain Monte.

We have seen Monte follow the big brute from the Texan town, resolved to protect his young *protege*, Dasher, against whom he believed the Bombshell had evil designs.

Although Monte had not followed Benson closely all the time, he knew that he had just paid Romero a visit.

The man from Coyote appeared to know that the Bombshell had quitted the ranch in high dudgeon, from the way in which he scoured across the plains.

Had the ruffian, by visiting Romero, discovered Dasher's whereabouts?

Monte was fearful that he had.

Keeping the Bombshell in sight, Captain Monte also crossed the stream, and followed after him.

The horses made no noise in the rich, soft grass of the land beneath their hoofs, and the two men moved away at a rapid gallop.

The eye of a person used to the Texan plains becomes wonderfully acute; after dark it seems

to possess the vision of the owl, and Monte's many trails at all hours enabled him to keep the Bombshell in sight when thousands would speedily have lost him.

"I'm follered, by Jehu!" suddenly ejaculated Benson. "Romero's not goin' ter let me depart in peace. I'll make it interestin' fer him without loss ov time."

He reined in his steed and wheeled about so quick that he caught the exclamation of surprise that fell from his pursuer's lips.

"Follerin' ther Bombshell, eh? Wal, I'm hyer! Thar's no better place on earth fer us ter meet than this. I hope ye've brought my lasso along, fer I'll take it now."

A smile flitted across Monte's face.

"He doesn't know me," he said to himself. "I never had his lasso. I wonder what he means?"

With his last words the man from Coyote pulled his grayish sombrero over his eyes and kept on.

From under the brim he saw that the bully was watching him, and waiting impatiently for his coming up.

All at once Monte's horse stopped alongside the Bombshell's steed, and his left hand threw back the rancher's hat.

"My God! Monte!" burst in tones of astonishment from Benson's throat as he recoiled from the face thus suddenly revealed.

"Who did you expect to see—Romero?" was the response.

"Yes," was the quick confession.

"Won't I answer just as well?"

"No! you won't fight me!" was the snoring taunt. "I've been to Coyote too often."

"You never tried me. We are not all cowards there."

Monte's eyes blazed like white-heated globes of iron.

He leaned forward as he spoke, bisseing his words, which made up a challenge, into the Bombshell's very teeth.

"My mother never bore a coward!" he grated. "The man who charges her with that infamy lies! more, he shall not live!"

Faced thus by a man of whose near presence he had not dreamed, Big Benson made no reply.

He stared into Monte's face, which was the picture of hatred and defiance.

"You want the boy—take me!" continued the man from Coyote. "I have sworn that you shall not touch one hair of Dasher's head. Why don't you talk, you miserable snake of the plains? Where's your tongue? It is Monte talking to you—Captain Monte, who brands you as the biggest coward in Texas!"

Was not this enough to stir the blood of the veriest poltroon on earth?

"An' I am hyer, knife an' all!" in thunderous tones, and the glitter of the stars flashed along the blade of a twelve inch bowie.

With the knife clutched in his right hand, Big Benson rose in his stirrups and leaped at Captain Monte's breast.

"You've matched the fuse, Monte!" he cried.

"No man calls me a coward an' lives."

The reply was the darting of a hand at the arm about to drive the bowie downward, for

Captain Monte had sprung erect, his keen eyes catching the Big Texan's every movement.

Down came the blade, driven with tremendous power by the swarthy villain, but a hand clutched the wrist and stopped it in mid-air!

The shock almost precipitated Monte from his seat, but he held on and flashed victory from his eyes at the desperado.

"Coyote bids you good-by forever!" he hissed. "You will never touch the boy, for the knife of Monte rides the plains of you!"

There was the gleam of another blade in the soft Texan starlight—a blade not as long as the Bombshell's—and hard upon its descent rung out a wild cry that pierced the night.

The twelve-inch bowie dropped from Big Benson's hand and struck the shoulder of his horse which went off like a rocket!

Captain Monte released the wrist in time to prevent being dragged from the saddle, and turned to see the terror of the Texan frontier hanging from his stirrups as the mettled horse bore him on!

The meeting and the flight in the saddle had not occupied the length of time it has taken us to record them.

"You'll not be bothered by the Texan bully now, Dasher," remarked Monte, ere Burly Benson disappeared. "He discovered to his sorrow that Coyote—poor, bullied Coyote—held one man who feared him not. I've sent him to the vultures of the plains, and I appeal to heaven for approval of my deed."

Monte threw up his hand as he finished, and his words seemed to come back from the stars with an echo that pleased him.

After a while he gathered up the reins and turned his horse's head toward the southwest.

He could go back to Coyote now.

Ah! if he could have pierced the space into which the Brazos Bombshell had been borne, he might not have galloped toward Coyote with the confidence that inspired him.

He had struck to kill, but had his bowie fulfilled his purpose?

Time will tell

CHAPTER VII.

THE RECAPTURE.

WITHIN five days after Big Benson's visit to Romero, a change took place at the rancher's house.

Romero's countenance did not wear the anxious look it had lately worn, for Rita had come back, accompanied by Dasher, who had assisted her, as we have seen, in her escape from the Comanches.

Many reminders of the Indian's visit to the ranch still remained; the desolated pastures told a woeful story, and the broken furniture showed where the red tornado had passed.

"Dasher has told me that he has discovered the doomed assassin," said Rita to her handsome guardian one evening, as the twain occupied the porch before the house. "And I think he also said that you knew him, too."

Romero looked at his beautiful ward and smiled.

"Did Dasher say that?" he asked. "Ah! I

might have known that he would mention it. But, why have you not broached this subject before, my pet? You have been home two days, and—"

"Pardon me. I have kept silent, fearing that Dasher's news was too good to be true. Then I was waiting for you to speak of it. Tell me, Romero—is the man called Big Benson the fiend I have sworn to kill?"

The rancher looked up into the face of the girl who had glided to his side, and his arm stealing around her waist, drew her to him.

"He is the man," he said. "While you were gone he visited me."

Rita gave a start.

"What! Benson, the murderer, here?" she exclaimed.

"In this house, child. He saw the lasso."

"And recognized it?"

"Yes."

"And wanted it?"

"That he did."

"What did you tell him?"

"I bade him have patience, promising that it should be returned to him before long."

"Good! I will redeem your promise, Romero!" cried the girl, her eyes kindling with a revengeful light. "Why was not I here when the villain came?"

"If you had been here he would not have visited the ranch. What a splendid opportunity I had to avenge your wrongs, Rita! I could have rid Texas of its greatest bully."

"But you did not?"

"I did not. It was no trouble for me to keep my hands off of the Brazos Bombshell, because I thought of the sure revenge time will take."

"Time and Rita!" was the response.

"Romero, now that the trail is hot why may I not take it? You can teach me no more; you acknowledge that. You say that I can shoot as well as any marksman in Texas, and as for the lasso—you declare that I can out-cast Romero, the monarch of the noose! Let me go. I cannot rest here knowing, as I do, that Big Benson is my man."

The arms of Rita encircled the rancher's neck and her dark eyes made up an appeal which was hard to resist.

"I have never crossed you in anything, girl. I never will," said the grizzled rancher. "You wanted to learn the use of rifle and revolver and it became Romero's joy to learn you; you wanted to be able to sit a wild horse and cast the lasso, and you cannot say now that you have not mastered all that."

"No. A thousand thanks to you, Romero."

The old rancher's eyes beamed proudly.

"When would you go?" he asked.

"Now! The old home seems a prison to me."

"You shall go—to-morrow," was the reply.

"With daylight you shall begin your hunt for the terror of the Rio Pecos. You have always requested that you should hunt him alone. I will not interfere; but you will let me set you on his trail, girl?"

"Yes, yes, Romero, but beyond that no man shall go."

"I submit. Where is Dasher?"

"He went back to Coyote."

"What do you think of Dasher, child?"

The question so directly put made Rita start; Romero's look was riveted upon her.

"There! don't ask me now," she said courageously. "You have not forgotten my oath. No love is to turn me from my purpose. I am now to think of it until I have fulfilled my vow. Dasher will not be gone long, but he will not find me here when he comes back."

Baffled in his attempt to obtain Rita's feelings for the young man, who was her only youthful acquaintance, Romero, relapsed into silence which the girl did not try to break.

After a while she slipped from his arms, and imprinted on his forehead a kiss that roused him.

"Good-night, Romero," she said, cheerily. "I am going to bed. To-morrow ere the sun rises we will be off!" and followed by the old ranchero's smile Rita bounded away, leaving him the sole occupant of the porch.

For a moment he sat with face turned toward the door beyond which Rita had disappeared, and then he started up like a man startled by a strange sound.

"It is going to be so—I know it!" he exclaimed. "For some time past I have noticed a resemblance. Would to Heaven it would turn out thus. I must see Captain Monte. I will go to Coyote when Rita has departed."

The rancher's ward thinking only of the trail of vengeance she expected to strike on the morrow, went to her little boudoir whose back window looked out upon a shed roof in the rear of the house.

Ere she retired she drew the fatal lasso from its hiding-place and regarded it with flashing eyes.

"We go together to-morrow morning!" she cried, addressing the coil. "You have encircled my father's neck, infernal cord, and you shall soon do your destined work. Your days are nearly numbered, Burly Benson. The little girl who swore on the bank of the Rio Pecos to hunt you down is on your trail at last. Romero has taught her the uses of the lasso, and she is capable of catching the wildest horse in Texas. Vengeance takes a mighty step to-morrow. Rita will keep her oath to the letter!"

The beautiful Nemesis did not see the snake-like eyes which from the thick foliage of the tree that bent over the shed were fastened upon her with a gleam of triumph.

The night was warm and she did not close the window, but putting away the lasso, sought her couch to dream of the morrow.

In a short time not a sound was heard about the house.

A silver crescent hung itself in the cloudless skies, and myriads of stars made the trees cast a heavy shadow over Romero's home.

Suddenly there was a movement of the foliage of the tree behind the back building, and a human figure crept forth and began to drag itself across the roof.

Once in the starlight, it developed into an Indian, lithe of limb, but well muscled, and with eyes that fairly blazed.

His crawl was entirely noiseless; he gained the window, paused a moment and then crept into the room.

As if he possessed the eyes of an owl, he went

straight to Rita's couch, and, quick as a flash, his hands swooped down upon the sleeping girl.

There was a start and a slight waking cry, but the Comanche suppressed both.

"Not a word, Texas Flower!" he said threateningly. "Red Crest has come back for you, that is all."

Red Crest himself!

The prospect before her was enough to frighten Romero's ward into insensibility.

Resistance in the arms that encircled her was quite useless, and she was carried mute over the roof beyond the window, and dropped with her captor to the ground below.

Then she saw that the young chief of the Comanches was not alone.

"Here, take Texas Flower!" commanded Red Crest, handing his captive to another Indian who glided toward him from the body of the tree, and Rita changed hands.

Red Crest went back toward the house, and Rita saw him stoop at the foot of the shed.

"Great heavens! the wretch is going to apply a match to our home!" flashed across her mind.

That was just what the Comanche was about to do.

A minute later he reappeared at Rita's side, and took her from the arms of his companion.

Where he had stooped was a flame which was increasing in volume, and in a short time the house would be doomed.

Rita thought of Romero sleeping calmly just beyond the fire; his danger roused her to action.

All at once she dashed Red Crest's hand from her mouth and a wild cry pealed from her throat, but before it ended the red hand was back again.

The Indians now left the burning house.

A few yards away they found two Indian horses upon whose back they sprung.

"White boy no get between Texas Flower and Red Crest this time!" ejaculated the red-skin as the steed dashed away. "Red Crest and his brave will watch for him, and if he comes, his scalp will hang in the Comanche's lodge."

The horses seemed to possess the speed of the wind for in a few minutes they were beyond the limits of Romero's vast possessions.

All at once Red Crest reined in his steed and wheeled toward the rancher's home.

The horses had gained the summit of a rise from which in the daytime a magnificent view of the surrounding country could be obtained.

"Big fire back yonder," said the chief, stretching his naked arm toward the south. "White herder's house burn well."

A shudder ran through Rita's frame.

She could not avoid seeing the fire that looked like a blazing star on the dark horizon, yet she knew that it was not a star, but Romero's home.

The red tongues of flame leaped heavenward, blotting out, as it were, the stars overhead, and adding a terrible emphasis to the Indian's vengeance.

"You'll get your dues for all this," suddenly cried Rita, looking into Red Crest's face.

"Who'll pay the Comanche back?" said the grinning chief. "Will the white herder's ashes follow Red Crest and strike him?"

"Romero may not, but there are others. You forget me, and—Dasher!"

The Comanche's answer was a smile of defiance, and then sending up a thrilling whoop he turned his steed about, and sent him on once more at a furious gallop.

The fire disappeared beyond the hills left behind, but Rita could not help thinking of the new disaster, the one which fate had placed between her and the beginning of her hunt for the Brazos Bombshell.

Red Crest was proud of his triumph; this time the Texas Flower, as he called his captive, should not escape.

All through that eventful night the Comanche rode across the Texas plains, and the sun came up to shine on the white face of the fair girl who had dropped asleep in his arms.

"Look, Red Crest!" suddenly exclaimed the chief's companion, pointing to the right. "Does not the big yellow lassoer approach us?"

Red Crest looked over the outstretched arm a moment and then started.

A man was riding toward them from a point on their right—a man with a broad-brimmed sombrero and embroidery on his Mexican jacket.

"It is the yellow-skinned boaster," grated Red Crest, fire flashing from his eyes. "We must meet him, Long Arrow; but watch him close. We are two; he is one. He shall not have the Texas Flower."

Meanwhile the man thus suddenly discovered was rapidly nearing the red-skins who regarded him with lowering looks from the back of the horses.

Rita now awake saw him, too, and while she looked a strange gleam lighted up her eyes.

All at once the burly rider straightened in his saddle and the next moment his horse halted directly in front of the Comanches.

"I'm a howler if this isn't luck!" burst from his mouth. "Here's Romero's daisy ward in ther hands ov ther crack Comanche chief. I'm ther original Brazos Bombshell with a gash in my anatomy, but loaded to ther fuse fer all that. I'll take thet prairie flower, chief. Hand 'er over."

Red Crest instinctively drew back, but the next instant two revolvers were thrust forward.

"Come! toss her over, er ther Bombshell will explode!" was the cool threat.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I AM META'S CHILD!"

WHAT, give up his beautiful prize to a desperado who had bullied him in his own camp?

Is it a wonder that Red Crest ground his teeth, and, clinging to Rita, shot Benson looks that seemed almost capable of killing?

"What's yer decision, chief? I can't sit here waitin' till I grow fast to ther saddle. Shoot off yer mouth an' let ther Bombshell know yer intentions."

The revolvers still covered Red Crest and his companion; the moments were slipping away.

"Goin' ter hold on to ther prairie daisy, eh? Then I'll begin!"

The next second one of the weapons cracked and Long Arrow bounded from his saddle, to strike the earth with a bullet in his brain.

"How does that strike ye?" demanded the giant of Red Crest. "It's not worth while to tell ye whose turn will come next. Shall I hev ther Texas Pink?"

Brave as he was, the young Comanche chief valued life above all things. He knew that another moment of refusal would bring him a doom as terrible as Long Arrow's. The cool eyes that looked over the Bombshell's revolvers told him that the Texan bully was not to be trifled with.

"Yellow face shall have the girl," he answered sullenly.

"Put her on the ground then."

With a countenance which told that he intended to play another hand in the future, Red Crest lowered Rita to the ground and then faced the Bombshell again.

"The most sensible Injin I ever saw!" exclaimed the desperado. "I'll take care ov ther daisy, chief. We've met afore, but thet's nothin'. We'll git along in first-class style. Now move on er stay hyer, jest as you wish. Don't foller this infant, if you please. When ther Brazos Bombshell explodes thar's always somebody hurt."

All this while Rita stood where Red Crest had put her down, her eyes fixed on the man who had wrested her from her Comanche captor.

Could it be that fate had so soon brought her face to face with the lassoer whom she had sworn to hunt down and choke with his own noose?

"This is a change ov masters," said the Bombshell, guiding his steed to where she stood, and stooping down to lift her to a place on the saddle of Long Arrow's horse. "I guess I don't need any introduction. Everybody knows ther Brazos Bombshell. I'm not a chromo in a gilt frame, but I am old business in more things than one."

Rita did not reply, for her look had become a stare; she seemed to be photographing Big Benson's face and figure on her mind.

Her thoughts went back to the home on the Rio Pecos, to the wild oath beside the dying mother, to her schooling under Romero's eye, to the renewal of that vow a thousand times in secret, and all against the fiend who faced her, whose captive she was.

She did not resist when the Brazos Bombshell lifted her upon the horse, and turned to the glaring Comanche.

"Don't look so mad—it hurts me," he said to Red Crest. "We're not brothers, but we oughtn't to chaw one another up. I expect you'll try ter git even with me fer my mornin's job; but it'll be a rainy day when you do. Don't touch off the quarter-second fuse ov this bombshell. It'll do you no good. Stir me up an' I'm worse than a million earthquakes."

A moment later the two horses were flying over the plain, gazed after by the maddest Indian that ever filled a Comanche saddle.

"Did they steal ye from ther ranch?" asked Benson, turning suddenly upon his captive.

"Yes, while I slept."

"Ther vipers! Whar war Romero?"

"Asleep, too."

Rita shuddered as she answered.

"Did they wipe him out?"

"I'm afraid so. Red Crest fired the house."

Big Benson made no reply, but the girl caught his eye at that moment, and thought she detected a secret triumph there.

"They tell me thet yon kin cast the lasso," he said, after a minute's silence. "I've heard ov you all over Texas. Whar did Romero run across you in the first place?"

The girl started.

"My mother gave me to him, I believe, and he promised to bring me up," she said, recovering.

"Thet's ther way, eh? Wal, she gave Romero a daisy, didn't she? Look me in ther face jest fer a moment, little one. Thar! you hev eyes jest like a woman I used ter know."

"Ah!"

"Eyes jest like hers! They call you Rita, don't they?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what she called her little girl. Mebbe I'll go back to ther Pecos kentry some day, an' see what ever became ov ther pair. You'll send me back."

"I?"

"Yes, because your eyes ar' jest like Meta's war."

Rita could hardly control her feelings; the big brute was talking about her mother.

All doubts had vanished now; she had found the right man!

"I'll make him go on," she said to herself.

"I will see if he dare confess the truth."

"So I look like Meta's child, do I?" she asked.

"Did I say her child? No; I never saw it," was the reply. "I say your eyes look like Meta's."

"Meta who?"

"Meta Doyle it was afore it became Meta Mayne."

Benson's tone changed as he pronounced the last name; it sounded like the hiss of a prairie viper.

"You did not fancy Meta's husband, I see," said Rita, catching his eyes.

"Not very much," he smiled. "More than one man thought a heap ov that woman, but the one that got her didn't keep her long."

"Why not?"

"He died."

"At home?"

"Not exactly that, but on ther road ter ther shanty. I hear that he wore a Texas collar when he reached Meta."

"He was lassoed, then?"

"Perhaps."

"He had at least one murderous rival."

"Thar war one Texan who couldn't stand by an' see him live with the woman he loved. They used ter do thet way up in ther Pecos kentry. Mebbe it's ther style thar yet. I don't know. I hev'n't been thar fer nine years."

"Who threw the lasso over Meta's husband's head?" asked Rita, determined if possible to push the assassin to the wall.

"They never found out an' I don't think any-

body cared much. You see, ther major war one ov those gentlemen chaps what don't take very well on ther Texan plains, tharfore nobody cared who noosed him."

"You forget Meta."

"Oh, yes; she took it ter heart ov course. Blamed ef she didn't 'pear ter think a good deal ov her Jim-dandy man."

With an effort the captive smothered the cry that rose to her lips, and tried to calm herself.

They were riding slowly across a wide plain whose grass, reaching above their horses' fetlocks, was still wet with dew.

Suddenly Romero's ward leaned toward Benson and her hand fell upon his arm.

"You make me speak," she said. "I know something about Meta Mayne."

"You?" cried the astonished Texan.

"Yes. She is dead."

"Thet's not strange, seein' that many years hev passed since thet noosin' night. But what ever became ov her girl?"

"She is alive."

"By Jove! she must be a daisy!"

Rita did not seem to hear the compliment.

"That little child made fatherless by a devil's noose has taken an oath to hunt the murderer down—to strangle him as he strangled her father," she almost hissed.

"Mebbe she will never find the right man."

"She has found him."

"What's his name?"

"Burly Benson."

"Then you—"

"I am Meta's child! I am Rita Mayne!"

The Brazos Bombshell recoiled with a startling cry.

"Great God! I told you from ther first thet you hed Meta's eyes," he exclaimed, staring at Rita.

"Her eyes, and her dying words to nerve me for revenge!"

"Not on this individual!" was the quick retort, as the desperado started up. "So, you are Meta's child? Wal, I'm glad it's settled. She swore ye ter vengeance, did she—vengeance fer ther major's chokin'? Thet's how my lasso came to Romero's house. He said he found it in the Pecos kentry."

"He did when he found me!" was the reply.

The Bombshell's discovery had made him rein in his horse, and Rita, who had also stopped her steed, was looking straight into his eyes.

"I'll see about yer revenge, my Texas pink," he laughed, suddenly. "Time cures many wounds."

"But not mine! I will keep my oath. As sure as God reigns, I will run you to earth!"

"An' lasso me, Rita?"

"Yes."

"I'm the Brazos Bombshell. No man has ever got ahead ov me; no woman shall. Beware, my pre ty tigress!"

Rita turned and jerked from the knob that held it the Comanche lasso that hung on her horse's shoulder.

It was well coiled and quite heavy as a weapon.

"Take this in earnest of what's to come!" she cried, whirling upon the surprised bully, and

before he could interpose a hand the Indian lariat was laid across his bronze face with all the strength Rita could summon to her aid.

A hoarse oath was forced from Big Benson by the blow which drew blood, for the coil seemed to cut like a knife.

He reeled away, with difficulty keeping his seat, but the blow was not repeated.

"Your doom is sealed! I will keep my oath to the letter, and with the cord you wielded once. I am Rita, the avenger!"

Away went the girl's steed as she finished, and glancing over her shoulder, she saw the terror of the Texas border sitting, statue-like and thunder-struck, where she had left him.

All at once a wild yell reached her ears, and she saw his horse plunge forward.

She smiled as she watched him drive the spurs into his black steed's bowels, but she did not fear him.

She knew that she rode the better horse.

CHAPTER IX.

COYOTE'S WILDEST NIGHT.

THE second night after the occurrences detailed in the foregoing chapter, there rode into Coyote City, on the borders of the Staked Plain, a horseman whose presence drew an exclamation from at least one man's lips.

"Great God! The Brazos Bombshell!"

Big Benson's face seemed to have grown a shade darker, his eyes had a mean, mad look.

It was evident that he had lost the beautiful prize he had wrested from Red Crest, the Comanche.

Rita the avenger had out-galloped him across the Texan plain, and this fact accounted in a measure for his abrupt appearance alone in Coyote.

There was one man in the border "city" who believed that Benson had invaded it for the last time, and he it was who uttered the exclamation just penned.

Captain Monte had not forgotten the bowie-knife combat in the saddle. He believed that his blade had terminated the Bombshell's career, and the story of that fight he had told to but one person—Dasher his *protege*.

From the door of his cabin Monte caught the figure of his enemy moving up the street.

Instinctively he drew back into the shadows beyond the threshold and watched him ride past.

All at once some one sprung into the cabin, and a voice exclaimed:

"You have been mistaken all this time! Big Benson is out there!"

The speaker was young Dasher.

"What vitality the Texan tiger has!" said Monte. "I would have sworn at the time that my bowie found his heart. Heaven knows I struck for it. Then, when I saw his horse drag him away by his heels, I had a right to say 'Good-by.' Yes, I know he's out there."

And Monte shut his teeth hard behind the last word.

"Are you going to meet him?"

"I don't know; it is owing to what he does. He mustn't provoke me—he must not challenge me. I think I know what brought him back to Coyote. We will see how he acts."

Monte, who was but half-armed when the Bombshell rode into Coyote, now proceeded to add a formidable bowie to his armament.

"Don't meet him!" suddenly cried Dasher, springing between Monte and the door. "Let the Bombshell explode, as he calls it, and move on. Think of what I have told you. He belongs to a young girl whom he has deeply wronged. Let her take vengeance. She will come by and by. She has sworn to find him, and find him she will!"

This appeal seemed to affect Monte; he leaned forward and looked into Dasher's face.

"I know that Rita has the best right to him," he said, "but you forget that I am a hunted man now—that Big Benson wants Monte's blood because Monte failed to kill him."

"I forget nothing," said the youth, quickly. "Stay back for my sake. I confess to you, Monte, that I love Rita. I have asked her to become my wife, but she reminds me of her oath to love no man and not to think of marriage until she has lassoed the Brazos Bombshell."

"What if I should meet and slay him?"

"Then I shall despair, for Rita will never wed."

"Did she say this?"

"Yes, twenty times."

"Then I stay here. I could not face that border grizzly to-night without having a combat. I will not go out for your sake."

"Thanks, Monte, thanks!" cried Dasher, grasping Monte's hand. "I will never forget—"

"Hark! what's that?"

The two men sprung to the door and listened side by side.

"I came hyer ter meet Cap'n Monte! Trot 'im out!" they heard. "His knife warn't long enough, an' he didn't hit ther right spot. Whar is he? I'm loaded ter ther muzzle. I'll teach him that he mustn't monkey with the baud wagon unless he's got a horn. Whar ar' ye, Monte? Coward, sneak an' border bum!"

A mad oath shot from Monte's throat.

"It's more than man can stand!" he grated.

"Swallow it. Rita will pay him for it all," said Dasher, at his side, and the youth's hand was laid restrainingly on his arm.

Monte bit his lips.

"I wonder if the Bombshell has a crowd around him?" he said.

"I'll go and see."

Monte would have kept Dasher back, but the youth sprung away before he could be restrained, and in a moment was out of sight.

"Listen at the bound!" hissed the man left in the cabin, as he chafed at the door like a chained tiger. "I am expected to stay here within bearing distance and swallow it all, just because a girl has sworn to run him down and lasso him. There he goes off again. That's what he calls an explosion, I suppose. Curse me if I will listen."

Monte shut his cabin door, and walking back through the darkness, threw himself upon his hard cot in one corner.

He was afraid to trust himself longer at the door lest he could not control his passion.

Five minutes passed away, and then the restless Monte rose and went to the door again.

He threw it open to hear a new outburst of wrath from the loud-mouthed desperado who still tarried in Coyote.

"I'll settle him. It's more than I can stand," he exclaimed, taking a lasso from the wall.

He left the cabin and hurried toward that part of the town from whence the voice proceeded.

He knew that Benson had halted in the square, which, although it was not large, was regular and picturesque.

On more than one previous occasion the Brazos Bombshell had halted there and relieved himself of some of the superabundance of meanness his soul contained.

He always drew a crowd, for the citizens of Coyote, taken as a whole, could stand more bullying than the inhabitants of all the other Texas towns.

With the coil in his right hand, Monte approached the crowd by which the big ruffian was almost entirely surrounded.

His step was noiseless, and his eye constantly on the lookout for his foe.

At last he spied the Bombshell, sombrero and all. The burly brute stood erect in his stirrups, with cocked revolvers in his hands, heaping all manner of abuse upon Coyote as a town, and especially cursing Monte, one of its most respected citizens.

"Yer border brave dar'n't show his whisky-mug!" cried the Bombshell. "He knows thet I'm worse than jumpin' lightnin'!"

"That's a lie!" ground out the man who had reached the rear of the crowd with the lasso ready for a cast. "In just one second I'll show you where Monte is."

The next instant the citizens of Coyote saw a lasso shoot toward the man on horseback, and an exciting cry burst from many lips as it settled over the Bombshell's head and was drawn tight!

"Heavens! it is Monte! He said he would stay away," said Dasher starting forward as Big Benson was jerked from his saddle, his arms pinioned to his sides, and his revolvers rendered useless.

"Stand back!" cried Monte, to the crowd, whose weapons now began to leap forth, since the man whose bullying they had swallowed a hundred times, lay helpless on the ground. "Don't come near me, Dasher! I'm not going to kill this prairie-wolf."

Awed by Monte's look and words, Dasher stopped and looked on.

A single bound carried Captain Monte to the side of his victim, who recognized him with a growl.

"Wal, yer knife failed t'other night!" he said. "Now ye'r' goin' ter try ther lasso. Thet's what ye call fair, Monte?"

The man of Coyote made no reply, but kicked Benson's revolvers twenty feet away.

"I don't want your blood," he said. "You've got to leave Coyote."

"Without a settlement with you, Monte? Ye'r' a coward!"

"Oh, you can't provoke me," smiled Monte. "Get up."

Benson sprung upon his feet and threw a quick, covetous glance toward his weapons.

"You can't have them," said Monte's eyes, then he said aloud:

"Will you leave Coyote if I give you liberty?"

"I suppose I'll hev to. You've got the drop on me ter-night. Give me my shooters."

"I'm no fool. You go without them."

"Loosen yer lasso, then."

Monte obeyed, and as the noose fell at the Bombshell's feet he threw his hand upon his horse's neck.

Another moment saw him seated firmly in his saddle, and the glance that he threw upon the breathless crowd was full of fire and defiance.

All at once he threw up his bronzed right hand and straightened in his stirrups.

"When I'm forced to leave I always come back on a tornado!" he shouted. "When I come back ter Coyote thar'll be an explosion hyer thet'll shake all Texas. Blamed ef I don't post yer town from the Cimarron ter the Gulf as ther place whar they breeds cowards and border bums!"

This was too much.

Rendered courageous by Monte's example the crowd surged forward with revolvers and bowies drawn for the speaker's life.

"Halt!" exclaimed a new voice and a youthful figure landed between the border ruffian and the Texans. "Not while I am here shall Big Benson's blood be shed."

"Smash my picters! ef it ain't ther boy, Dasher!" cried the Bombshell. "I know what he meant when he told me that a lasso war waitin' fer me. He's thet prairy daisy's pard, an' he thinks he'll save me fer her. Come hyer, Dasher."

The three last words were spoken in tones that reached the boy's ears only, and having checked the maddened crowd, he wheeled upon the Brazos Bombshell, and then went forward.

From under the broad brim of his sombrero Benson watched the youth's approach.

"I know what you meant thet night," he said, leaning forward. "I've seen ther gal. I know who she is, an'— I'll take *this*, Dasher!"

Quick as a flash the border rough darted at the revolver displayed in Dasher's belt, and as he straightened on his saddle, Dasher started back unarmed!

It was the fierce swoop of a frontier eagle.

A wild light danced in Benson's eyes as he wheeled toward Monte.

Up went the revolver as Monte drew his own, then there was a sharp report, and Dasher's best friend reeled away with a groan.

"Devil!" grated Dasher, leaping at the Bombshell.

"Don't, boy, don't! I'm worse than death!" and training the captured revolver on the startled crowd, the ruffian began to shoot over Dasher's head into it.

His rapid shots, every one of which took effect, seemed to paralyze the men of Coyote, and with the seventh one he struck his horse savagely with the spur and was off.

Dasher stood like one bewildered on the spot where Big Benson's swoop had robbed him of his revolver.

Already the desperado had disappeared.

Suddenly the sound of a horse's hoofs came from behind the boy.

He turned just as the animal landed in the square, and a moment later the horse halted before him.

"Who did this killing?" asked the rider into whose face Dasher started.

"Big Benson."

"Where is he?"

"He went in yon direction."

"Then I will find the bully to-night!" and away went the horse.

Dasher stared speechless after her.

He knew it was Rita.

CHAPTER X.

MISSING HER MARK.

"THEY thought they had me, ther fools! They knew they hadn't when I exploded with ther dead drop on ther bull lot. When I saw that boy's revolver I knew I hed a weepin that would shoot, fer a chap with his eyes wouldn't carry any other kind. I might hev dropped ther kid, but pshaw! he'll hurt no one. Oh, I'm still ther Brazos Bombshell!"

A lively wind blew against the rufian's hardened face, and stirred the raven hair that framed it.

In his eyes still shone traces of that light which flashed up in their depths when he trained Dasher's pistol on the Coyote crowd.

His voice had the ring of a desperado's triumph.

If he had drawn rein and listened intently, he would have come to the conclusion that he was followed.

The avenger was on his trail.

Rita plunged away after the border rough. Her horse was a well-limbed steed, swift as an Apache arrow, and as eager as his mistress to overtake the steed some distance ahead.

The girl's only offensive weapon, if weapon it can be called, was a black lasso that hung in its place against her saddle.

It was the same one with which Benson had choked her father, years before.

The match which Red Crest, the Comanche, applied to Romero's hacienda, as we have seen, had failed to destroy the instrument of vengeance.

The house had burned to the ground, but the roar of the flames had roused Romero, who, rushing up to Rita's room to save her, found nothing worth taking but the fatal cord.

Thus the lasso had fallen once more into Rita's hands, and she carried it at her saddle when she appeared so suddenly to Dasher in Coyote.

Coyote was soon left behind in the wild chase for a life, and burning to overtake Benson, the fair girl urged her steed to his utmost.

Big Benson's face was turned toward Laredo beyond the Staked Plains, but he had no notion of continuing his journey to that place.

At last he drew rein, and strange to say, Rita, although a mile in his rear, stopped at the same moment.

Benson had heard no noise, but the girl had. From her right came the swift rush of several horses.

"The Coyoters want him as badly as I do,"

she said, when she had listened a moment. "But they shall not have him! I will see to that."

Rita was about to resume the pursuit when several ghost-like figures flitted past, on her right.

"Indians! — Comanches!" she exclaimed. "They want him, too. Was ever a man so hunted before?"

She dashed ahead in the wake of the redskins who had struck the big rider's trail, and as she rode she loosened the black coil ready to her hand.

All at once a sharp cry came back from the starlight ahead, telling her that the red Centaurs had struck the game.

Benson had discovered that he was followed, not by the men of Coyote, but by the Comanches who owed him more grudges than one.

"We'll give 'em a race," he said to his horse. "By an' by we'll treat their red necks to ther lasso."

Away he went with the piercing yell ringing in his ears, and the Comanches thundering at his heels.

The Staked Plain has witnessed a thousand races for life both in the glare of the sun and after dark, and the desperado chased by the rek-skins had participated in a number himself.

The keen eyes of the Indians had spied him resting his horse after his ride from Coyote, and had announced their presence by the startling shout heard so plainly by Romero's ward.

She was pushing gallantly on.

There was one horse which the red raiders had spared among Romero's blooded herds, and she rode him now.

A better steed never pressed the soil of the Staked Plain, and a more accomplished and fearless rider than Rita had never mounted him.

On such a steed she was likely to come up with the Comanches whose horses, in all probability, were not very fresh.

Her plan was to pass them and hurl the avenging lasso over the Bombshell's head, then ride on, dragging him at her horse's heels through the scanty grass and cutting sand beneath her.

"Look down on your child, mother!" cried the girl. "I have found the author of all our troubles—found him at last. Nerve me for the task before me! Guide my noose to his head, for my heart burns for vengeance when I think of the past!"

On, on, bearing swiftly down upon the Comanches between her and her prey pressed the girl, holding in her hands the slender cord.

"Faster! faster! This is a snail's pace!" she cried to her horse even then straining himself to his utmost.

Her unloosed tresses streamed behind her like pennons, and her lithe figure, clad in a picturesque costume half masculine, set her off to advantage.

All at once the Indians seemed to become aware that some one was pressing after them.

Rita saw their ranks open; but they did not abate their pursuit.

An exclamation of triumph fell suddenly

from the avenger's lips—she was among the Comanches; another second and she had distanced them all!

Yells rose behind her.

The red-skins saw that they were likely to be cheated out of their prey.

In vain they pounded their horses, and yelled in their ears; Rita's steed bore her swiftly on.

A few yards only now separated her from Benson.

What if he should turn and send a bullet through her body?

The ranchman's ward did not think of this.

Rita's eyes were full of victory when she saw her enemy straining every nerve, but almost within reach of her lasso.

He had not recognized his new pursuer, but thought that the foremost one was the best rider in the Comanche nation—Red Crest, the young chief.

"I have him now!" suddenly cried the girl. "Ah! Romero, if you could but see my revenge!"

She straightened in the strong stirrups with her eyes riveted on the human quarry.

The lasso hung for a moment from her right hand, and then began to move in swift concentric circles around her head.

All at once it left her hand and shot forward.

Well might Rita hold her breath; the most important moment of her life had come.

Never before was a lasso better aimed. Romero had schooled her well.

The fatal noose was settling over Big Benson's head when Rita's steed stumbled, and the next second she was flying through the air.

The throw had been lost! A burrow had baffled the girl on the very threshold of success.

In her last moments of consciousness Rita saw the yelling Comanches rush past, then she fell back on the plain with a sensation of pain which seemed the precursor of death.

She had distanced the Indians, got between them and Benson for what?

To be tripped by a burrow in the sand, and to lose the man she had almost run down.

When the girl returned to consciousness her whole body was racked with pain.

She had fallen heavily, and the wonder was that she had not been trampled to death by the Comanches' horses.

The first object that met her gaze was her own horse standing near by.

The steed in falling fortunately broke no limb, and was ready to serve her again.

The lasso lay stretched out on the sand like a dark snake, and Rita seized it eagerly.

"It is not so bad, after all," she said. "Big Benson has escaped by a miracle, but I will find him yet."

At that moment the horse pricked up his ears, and looked toward the north.

"Are the Comanches coming back for me?" exclaimed Rita.

A number of horses were approaching—she could hear the pounding of their hoofs.

Despite her crippled condition, Rita moved to her steed's side and tried to gain the saddle; but in the effort, a dizziness overcame her, and she sunk back, exhausted.

The next moment the horses came up, and she saw the scalp-locks and war-paint of six Comanches.

"Where is Big Benson?" she asked the red-skin who stooped to pick her up.

"Him got away," was the reply.

Rita's eyes kindled.

"Thank Heaven for that!" she cried.

CHAPTER XI.

MONTE'S SECRET.

THE stumbling of Rita's steed at the moment when her lasso was settling over the Bombshell's head undoubtedly saved the desperado's life.

The Comanches gave up the chase, and rode back to the girl, when Big Benson halted on the plain and threw his sombrero into the air with a shout of triumph.

"Didn't git this pullet, did ye?" he exclaimed. "I don't more than half believe thet ther person what nearly lassoed me war a red-skin. I heard a wild cry as his hoss struck ther burrow. Mebbe it war thet gal—thet prairy daisy what wants Benson's life."

Instead of going back to settle his doubts, the Brazos Bombshell kept on at a gait that rested his horse.

He left Rita to the tender mercies of the Comanches, led, as he well knew, by Red Crest.

"Them Coyote fellers monkeyed with ther hand-wagon when they had no horns," he chuckled, as his thoughts went back to the bloody affair in the square of Coyote City. "I've settled accounts with Monte forever, an' with ther boy's shooter, too. When the boys fool with this bombshell they nearly always gits hurt. I'm a rattler when I git mad. They all want me now. I'm the most wanted gentleman at this moment in ther hull State ov Texas," and his coarse laugh sounded harshly on the night air.

He was more than ten miles from Coyote; Red Crest and his Comanches had chased him one-half that distance, but they had given up the chase.

All at once Big Benson wheeled and faced the south again.

"I b'lieve I'll go back," he said. "What d'ye say, Thunderbolt! They're talkin' about us down yonder. Back we go!"

Once more the big ruffian was going toward Coyote at a gait which would soon land him within the precincts of the border town.

"Halt! hyer we ar'!" he exclaimed, drawing rein and leaning forward to catch the import of certain voices the night wind bore to his ears.

He was not fifty yards from Coyote's most northern boundaries, and the sounds told him that some of the inhabitants were still awake.

By and by the sounds ceased without giving Big Benson any information, so he dismounted, and crept forward, his horse at a sign remaining stationary.

He was guided to the first dark cabin by the sound of a voice couched in the tones of a wounded man near his end.

For several minutes the Texas sport stood transfixed to a certain spot while the speaker went on.

"Thet's Monte," he said to himself. "I didn't

quite finish him, an' I've got back ter Coyote in time to hear his last words. Who's he talkin' to?—ther boy, ov course."

A lengthy stride had carried Benson to the cabin, and with eyes agleam with curiosity he was listening against the logs.

The interior of the cabin was dimly revealed by a candle, as Bombshell could see by a crack which he found.

It contained but two persons: Monte, who lay on a cot made on the floor, and Dasher, who sat at his side, holding one of his bronzed hands.

"Dasher," said Monte. "I'm getting to a secret I've kept for many years. Mebbe I wouldn't tell it now if thet Texas devil hadn't used ther drop he got on me to-night. A good many years ago, Dasher, a lot ov Apaches raided a ranch that belonged to a young rancher who had brought his young wife to the place about six months before. They had one child, a boy baby, when the red-skins came. The wife was as brave a woman as Texas ever saw. Her husband was away that day, but she faced the Indians, and told them that she would shoot the first one who entered the house. She stood on the porch in front of the hacienda with a revolver in her hand and her black eyes on fire.

"Well, Dasher, the most of those red-skins knew that she would shoot, but their chief made sport of her threat, and jumped from his horse upon the porch. He had hardly struck the boards ere he fell back, shot clean through the head by the rancher's wife. That started a bloody time. The hull lot of red-skins rushed upon the little woman and overpowered her, but not until she had got in three more boss shots. She was terribly mistreated, for when you stir up an Apache you rouse a tiger. They jerked the baby from his cradle, and at first had a notion to throw him into the flames of the hacienda; but they concluded to take him to the tribe and make a great white chief of him. When they went away the baby went along.

"That's what the Apaches did years ago, one September day. Now I'm coming to it. They gave the baby to a squaw, who undertook to raise him. One day a Texan war riding along a stream in the Apache country, when he came across three little codgers playing in the water. One of them was a white boy about three years old. The Texan was a pretty wild chap then, and took a fancy to the white boy, so he got down, picked him up and rode off. That's how the Apaches lost their future big chief. I guess you begin to guess who that baby was, Dasher. Well, Captain Monte was the Texan who took him from the Apaches."

A cry fell from Dasher's lips.

"And I am the rancher's child!" he exclaimed. "I have often wondered how you came to raise me, Monte. You have told me at last."

A smile brightened Monte's countenance.

"Mebbe I shouldn't have kept it from you so long," he said. "And if Big Benson hadn't shot to-night, I expect you would not have heard what I have told you. Your father—"

"Yes; tell me about him, Monte!" interrupted Dasher.

"Of course. You'll want to go to him now.

That's right. You are not Monte's child, but he hasn't a drop of blood he wouldn't shed for you. When I found you paddling in the water with the little Indians you had a chain around your neck, which from some reason the red-skins had never taken from you. Attached to that chain was a locket. I've saved it for you, Dasher."

As Monte ceased he drew from his bosom a small pocket of soft buckskin, which he handed to the youth.

With eyes full of curiosity, and eager fingers, Dasher began to undo the packet, closely watched by Monte, whose countenance beamed with satisfaction.

All at once Dasher uttered an exclamation of surprise, for he had brought to light a delicate gold locket, attached to a brilliant chain of the same material.

"Open it," said Monte, watching him.

The boy stooped over the candle and obeyed.

For several moments he gazed at the picture he had brought to view, and then exclaimed:

"How beautiful she was! You need not tell me, Monte, that this is my mother's portrait. I know it!"

"She was your mother, boy. You would have found your father long ago, if I had not been so selfish. I couldn't think of giving you up. But you have met him often and he has never suspected."

"What! I have met my father? It cannot be, Monte!"

"Ay, but you have," said the dying man.

"Dasher, my boy, look into my eyes and tell me that you forgive me for keeping this secret from you so long. I can't die with it in my heart. Look at Monte, Dasher, and say something."

The dark-faced man at the crack saw Dasher bend over the man reclining on the cot.

The faces of the twain almost touched.

"I forgive you a thousand times, Monte!" said Dasher in tones that did not escape Big Benson's ears. "I have been happy and I owe all my happiness to you."

The arms of Captain Monte went around Dasher's neck; they drew the boy close to him.

"Mebbe your father will not forgive me, but since you have, I don't care," he said. "Go to him, Dasher—go this very night, and place the locket in his hands. It will establish your identity, and you can tell him all that I have said."

"I will not leave you to-night," said Dasher. "To-morrow—"

"No, to-night—now!" was the interruption. "You have obeyed me in all important things. I will be here when you come back—mebbe not right here in this shanty; but I'll be in Coyote. Take my horse and go to your father. Good-by, boy."

"But you have not told me his name," said the youth, seeing that Monte did not proceed.

"How funny!" and the man smiled. "He has but one name. I don't think he ever had another. Men call him Romero."

Dasher sprung up with a cry.

"Romero my father? My God! I never dreamed of this."

"I expect not," said the man, who eyed him closely. "Romero is your father, and in the

girl he has brought up you will find a sister, Dasher, if not more than that."

For several seconds the youth stood bewildered in Monte's presence; he held the open locket in his hand, and his gaze wandered from Monte to it and back again.

"I will go!" he cried, rousing himself. "I am anxious to meet my father, although he will never be able to take from you, Monte, one particle of my love. You have been a father to me, and when you get well—"

Monte laughed in a manner that broke Dasher's sentence.

"I'm not going to get well. All the doctors in Texas couldn't patch Monte up."

"That's so," grated Big Benson, at the crack. "Ef they war to, I'd pretty soon undo their work. So ther youngster knows his father at last! I always thought he warn't yer kid, Monte. That's right; send him ter Romero with ther locket, but mebbe he'll never git thar. He's not likely ter while I'm around."

Five minutes later, having given Monte a farewell grasp, and heard his parting words, Dasher walked from the cabin bent on the unexpected mission.

"What will Romero say?" he asked himself, in almost audible tones. "And what will Rita exclaim when I reveal Monte's well-kept secret to her?"

He passed on, seeing not the crouching figure at the foot of the cabin, nor dreaming of the glittering eyes that followed him.

"I'll tackle ye in a few minutes, my huckleberry."

Having watched Dasher out of sight, and knowing that he was going after Monte's horse, Brazos turned toward the occupant of the cabin and watched him with triumphant eyes.

He knew that Monte, the man he had shot down in Coyote's square, was near his end; he could see the death spasms chase one another across his face.

"I'd like ter tell ye thet I'm goin' ter step between Dasher an' his father, but mebbe it wouldn't be policy," said Benson. "You expect ther boy ter fastin ter the Texas pink fer life; but he never shall. I've set the gal down fer my lady—fer Benson's prairy queen. I don't fear her lasso. I've never yet been looped by a string."

With a farewell glance at Monte, who had turned on the cot in his death agony, Benson rose and crept away.

"Ther youngster's comin' back fer another look," he said, halting a few rods from the cabin.

The next moment the figures of a man and horse came out of the shadows ahead.

It was Dasher, leading Monte's favorite steed.

All at once the Bombshell leaped at the boy and landed before him ere he was aware of anybody's presence.

"It's me, ther same old Bombshell!" he said. "I'm hyer on important business, Dasher. I hev already finished Monte, an' ye know it. I want thet locket under yer jacket."

Dasher recoiled with a sharp cry, and the desperado followed him up.

"Quick!" he said. "Give me thet locket er take the contents ov this dropper."

Dasher was looking into the muzzle of his own revolver!

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRADE THAT FAILED.

BIG BENSON had the youth completely at his mercy.

Dasher involuntarily dropped the rein he was holding in his hands and stared at the merciless face before him.

"It's no time for foolin'," continued the Bombshell. "I want that trinket—quick!"

Accompanying the demand was a quick movement of a bronze finger toward the revolver's trigger; Benson meant business.

"If I give it to him I will wrest it from him again," he said to himself. "This border tiger shall not keep his advantage long."

So saying, Dasher's hand was thrust beneath his jacket and the precious locket was brought to light.

The Bombshell's eyes snapped for triumph.

Dasher, reluctant to give up the prize, extended it slowly, too much so for Benson, who suddenly swooped down upon it like a kite and tore it from his grasp.

"Now you can't establish your identity," laughed the villain. "Just go to Romero, and tell Monte's secret without ther locket ter prove it, an' he'll kick yer out ov ther hacienda. He'll take no stock in the story."

"What is your motive for your work?" asked Dasher, glaring madly at the lassoer. "Why have you wrenched the prize from me?"

"You'll l'arn one ov these days. You ar' a boy yet—a mere coddlin', not up to snuff, an' no match fer ther Brazos Bombshell. What'll I do with this yer' locket? Time will tell."

"You heard Monte's story to-night?"

"Wal, I should reckon."

"You played eavesdropper."

"Mebbe so."

Dasher drew his well-built figure to its true height, and cried:

"We'll see who wins in the end. This is your triumph. Mine will come!"

"Threats, eh?" blurted Benson. "Mebbe I'd better press ther trigger."

"It may save you trouble in the future."

But the desperate sport did not fire; instead, the revolver dropped and he stepped aside, his big left hand having shut on the locket.

"Don't foller a Texas rattler, boy," he said. "It ar' liable ter turn an' strike," and the following moment he was walking off with the prize in his possession, and Dasher stood on the spot like a man in a trance.

"The Texas eagle swooped and got the prize," he suddenly exclaimed. "I would like to know what he wants with the locket. How can it benefit him—how assist him in any scheme? I'll see Monte. He may know."

Leaving the villain to depart in triumph, confident of winning in the end, Dasher hurried to Monte's cabin.

The narrow door stood ajar just as he had left it, and a dim light pervaded the little room.

The youth entered on tip-toe, for silence reigned beyond the door.

The cot was still occupied by a human figure,

but its unnatural position caused Dasher to spring forward.

Monte lay partly on his face.

Fearful of something terrible, the youth turned Monte over, and then uttered an exclamation of horror.

The dread stare in the lifeless eyes told him all.

Captain Monte was dead!

"Another reason why I should hate you, Benson!" he cried as he sprung up. "This is your work. You have killed Monte, the best friend a stolen boy ever had. Cross my path, if you dare. I may not respect Rita's vow if you do. You have got to die, but whether by noose or revolver, I dare not say."

He turned away and told some of Monte's friends that the well-known cabin was tenanted by the dead.

"Now my work begins," he said. "I have nobody to bind me to Coyote from this night."

He went back to the horse he had left near Monte's cabin, mounted him and rode away.

He did not know in which direction Big Benson had gone, but he rode toward the quarter lately occupied by Romero's hacienda.

If he had watched the Brazos Bombshell, he would have seen that he had galloped away in the same direction.

Dasher did not leave Coyote without being fully armed.

In addition to Monte's revolvers, he carried a formidable bowie and a lasso which he, like all men of the Southwest border, know so well how to use.

A long distance ahead of him rode the man who had triumphed over him.

He did not draw rein until from the summit of a rise, many miles from Coyote, he looked down upon the scene of Red Crest's last swoop—the ruins of Romero's hacienda.

"They gave it ther torch, sure enough," he said. "They made sure work of everything burnable. Nol! Thar's a shanty among ther trees."

As Benson finished he was surprised to see a moving figure among the trees on which he was gazing, and touching his steed lightly with the spur he rode forward.

The man among the trees was visible for a minute, and then suddenly disappeared into the temporary structure which, as the Bombshell had already discerned, had been erected since the fire.

Big Benson was riding boldly forward, and was near the shanty when the man reappeared, and as a rifle struck his shoulder, the desperado heard a voice he instantly recognized:

"Stand!" said the man with the rifle.

"Hang me ef it isn't Romero himself," ejaculated the border ruffian, biting his lips, and drawing rein, for the rancher's rifle held him at the owner's mercy.

"Keep off! I don't want the likes of you here," continued Romero.

"Don't, eh? Mebbe if you knew what I had you wouldn't go off so brash."

The rancher stepped out from among the trees, displaying his figure to the Texan bandit, but kept his rifle at his shoulder.

"Keep what you've got," came to Benson's ears from over the polished barrel of the Spencer,

"All right, Romero. I'm satisfied ef you ar'. I'll jest keep the locket which—"

The rancher's start broke the Bombshell's sentence.

"I struck 'im hard ther first blow!" he chuckled. "Old Monte didn't give ther boy anything but straight goods."

With the rifle lowered, and intense anxiety depicted on every lineament of his countenance, Romero was advancing toward Benson with rapid strides.

"What have you found—my baby's locket?" he asked, as he halted and looked up into the borderer's face.

"Your baby's locket?" echoed Benson. "You have no baby."

"No, but I had once."

"When?"

"Seventeen years ago."

"Whar is he now?"

"Heaven knows. Show me the locket you have spoken of."

"In a minute. What hev ye got to trade fer it?"

Romero did not see that the speaker was merely torturing him.

"Five thousand acres of the best grazing ground in Texas," he said, with a sweep of his arm. "It lies all around us."

Benson smiled.

"Would you give me my lasso fer it?" he said.

Romero started again, and seemed to recoil an inch.

"Mebbe the rope war burned up with yer haciendy," continued the Bombshell. "Ef thet's so, we can't exchange. So I kin take ther ranch fer ther locket? It's a big thing, Romero, but I've got no notion of settling down just yet. Look at the trinket," and the speaker held the prize up before Romero's eyes but, of course, out of his reach.

For a moment the ranchman gazed upon the locket, displaying a countenance which cannot be described.

The past seemed to have rushed suddenly back upon his mind, and again he was living over the terrible hour which had deprived him of wife and child.

"It is Chester's locket, my lost boy Chester!" he exclaimed. "It contains his mother's picture taken the day I made her my wife."

"She war a daisy, an' no mistake, Romero," said the Bombshell coarsely.

"Let me see her face again," and Romero held up his hand for the locket which Benson coldly drew further away.

"Not just yet. Why don't you ask whar I got it?"

"True. My God! I cannot be myself to-day. The sight of that locket unmans me! Where did you get it, Benson?"

"In Apache-land," said the Bombshell. "Didn't them red Greasers take yer boy?"

"Yes; and didn't I pay them for their work? Didn't I desolate their land until I grew tired of killing? You found that locket in a wigwam?"

"No; I found it on the breast of a young Injun who had been killed with an arrow."

"An Indian?"

"Yes; but he had white skin."

Romero recoiled with a cry.

"It was my poor boy, Chester!" he exclaimed. "I have missed him, after all. Dead! dead!! Now, Benson, you will part with the locket?"

"Fer ther ranch?"

"Yes, for every acre I own."

"Fer ther Texas Pink, too?"

"What?"

"Fer ther Ranch Rose?"

"Rita?"

"Ov course."

"You don't want her?"

"Thet's what I said."

"She isn't my child."

"Don't I know it? But she will stick to any bargain you make. Say that Rita shall be mine, an' ther locket falls at yer feet. Do you say it, Romero?"

"I can't."

"Then, we can't trade."

The rancher's hands tightened around his rifle's stock; his eyes flashed.

"The locket shall be mine!" he cried.

"Not just now," and the Bombshell's right hand swooping downward, clutched the barrel and held it fast. "Not ter-day, Romero," he continued, glaring triumphantly into the rancher's face. "Swear ter give me Rita, an' I'll throw ther trinket at yer boots."

"Never! I don't sell Meta's child."

"Yes, she's Meta's child. I know all about it. She wants my life—has sworn to take it, an' all thet; but I'm willin' ter swap fer her, notwithstandin'. I'll run all risks, Romero. Say ther word. I offer ye a fair trade."

"Hush! No more. Get off of my ranch. By heavens! if you stay here, I'll keep Rita from keeping her vow!"

Instead of moving away, the big brute only grinned derisively.

"I'll give you a chance fer ther trinket, Romero," he said. "Hang me ef I don't bet ye ther locket ag'in' yer ranch thet Rita never keeps her oath."

"You will?" cried Romero.

"Certainly. Ther locket ag'in' yer haciendy thet the Texas Pink never lassoes this prairie wolf."

"Agreed! I'll take that bet, Big Benson. I have all the confidence in the world in that girl. I raised her. I taught her to shoot and to use the lasso, for what?—to keep the vow she took beside her dying mother."

"Wal, I'll risk it all. My bet tells ye that, Romero. When will we call the bet decided?"

"When Rita's rope tightens round your neck," answered the rancher, through clinched teeth.

"No, when she rides with me hyer an' calls me her lord and master."

"I agree. When she does that this ranch is yours, and Texas shall not hold Romero another day."

The rancher was answered by a coarse laugh which still disturbed the air while Big Benson rode away, chuckling over his bet.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BOMBHELL'S TRAIL.

A RARE fall day was closing almost a week

after the scenes recorded in the foregoing chapter when a horse bounded into Coyote and halted in the tragic square.

The rider was unmistakably a girl although clad in border masculine garments, a rich buckskin jacket, and soft leggings of the same material.

She wore a jaunty sombrero over which lay a dark feather, and her feet were incased in beaded Comanche moccasins.

"Need we name her now?"

"Where is Dasher?" she asked the single man who came forward out of curiosity.

"Don't know," was the answer. "He went away the night Monte died, an' the rest ov Coyote went the next day. I'm keepin' house alone, doin' the honors ov the city."

"Whither have they gone?"

"Oh, don't you know?" said the Coyoter somewhat surprised. "The Brazos Bombshell came hyer an' exploded. Several of the boys war killed outright, an' Cap'n Monte lingered till nigh mornin'. Now you know whar they've all gone ter. They ar' huntin' the Texas tiger. Dasher, I take it, is lookin' fer him on his own hook. Monte war a father to thet boy an' ef he gits the drop on the Bombshell somethin' 'll tumble."

The girl listened to all this with varying emotions as her changing countenance showed.

"I'm not afraid of Dasher taking his life, but the men of Coyote must not find him," she murmured. "In which direction did the company move?" she asked the man.

"Toward the southeast."

"Did the trail lead in that direction?"

"Can't say about that. The Pecos Pardes led the procession. You've heard ov them, mebbe?"

"No."

"Thought all Texas had. Ef they run ther Bombshell down, good-by forever."

"Will they hang him?"

"Worse then thet. Afore they left Coyote they tried him an' sot the penalty."

"What was it?"

"Thar ar' just thirty in the Coyote gang, an' nineteen voted fer skinnin' alive."

"Heavens!" burst from the girl's throat.

"Majority always rules hyer," continued the man. "You don't think that Big Benson doesn't deserve peelin', I hope?"

"No; but those men mustn't do that. It would kill him."

"Wal, I should notice," smiled the Coyoter. "It's a tryin' process. How would you dispose of him?"

The girl's eyes sparkled.

"I'd choke him with the lasso, as he once choked the best man in Texas!" she said.

"Thet wouldn't last. Big Benson don't deserve to die thet easy. He bullied Coyote fer years, an' then finished by shootin' her best citizens. I expect you hate him, but I hope the Coyoters will get in their work before you find them."

"They will not though. Heaven is preserving that man for my vengeance. I feel it!"

A moment later the man was gazing after the unexpected visitor, who was being carried from the town in a cloud of dust and amid the rattle of hoofs.

"Wal, sho beats creation," he exclaimed. "She wants to choke the Bombshell, nothin' more. She'd better steer cl'ar ov the boys, fer they won't allow her to interfere with their hunt."

Meanwhile, the girl—Rita, of course—had passed out of sight, and the solitary guardian of the border town retired to his cabin with his head full of the late visitor.

"He says they are going to flay Big Benson; they shall do nothing of the kind!" she exclaimed in determined tones. "I'm going to be in at the death, as I swore to be, nine years ago. I have made my second escape from Red Crest, who captured me when I was helpless on the plain. Indian watchfulness could not keep me bound. If my horse had not stumbled when my lasso was circling over Benson's head, I would not be here hunting him to-night."

The horse ridden by the girl lassoer put a number of miles between her and Coyote, while the stars came out and beautified the sky.

All at once a stern command to halt rung in her ears, and laying her hand instantly on a revolver, she drew rein and leaned forward.

Rita quickly distinguished the figures of two mounted men, who had emerged from beneath the boughs of a clump of trees in her front.

"By Jove! it's the girl what rode after the Bombshell the night he killed in Coyote!" exclaimed one of the pair.

"Yes, I am Rita," answered Romero's ward, "and who are—"

"The Coyote Avengers."

The girl uttered an exclamation of joy.

She had come up already with the men who were hunting Big Benson with a purpose in their hearts horrible enough to make one shudder.

The vengeance of bordermen is always terrible.

"Are you all here?" asked Rita, moving forward until her horse stood between the men's steeds.

"No, we're divided. Thar ar' two trails, an' they're both fresh enough ter foller. Burly Benson has been in these parts within the last twenty-four hours, an—"

"Where's his trail?" interrupted Rita eagerly.

"About a mile back."

"Will you show it to me?"

The rangers exchanged swift glances before either spoke.

"What has set you ag'in' the Bombshell so?" asked one.

"Enough to forfeit his life. Don't ask me for the story. I won't waste time telling it. Show me the Texan's trail."

"We won't do it. You're not avenging Coyote; we ar'."

Instantly madness lighted up the girl's eyes.

"Where is your camp?" she asked.

"Whar we left it."

"You will not guide me to it?"

"No, nor show ye the trail!"

"Very well," and Rita bit her lips. "You men think to balk me by your refusal. You will fail. All Texas cannot keep me from finding Big Benson."

"Mebbe not, but ye'll find him dead!"

"Never! Look here; one of you men must show me the Bombshell's trail. I select you," and the girl leaned forward as her revolver went up. "'About face,' as they say in the army!" she continued, sternly addressing the startled Texan. "I am Rita, the avenger. Nothing, I have sworn, shall balk me. You will excuse me for pressing you into my service. I want that trail. I want it now."

"It's only one ov the two trails, both fresh, the Bombshell has made."

"I don't care. I want it. Guide me to it."

"What ef I should say blaze away?"

"I would obey the command," was the quick response. "My oath knows no failure. I am prepared to shoot my way to the man I want. Wheel about and take me to the trail."

"Take her to it, Chris. She's got the drop on ye, an' besides, thar's shoot in her eye," said the menaced man's companion. "The other gang is likely to find the Bombshell long afore the gal kin git her work in. Take her to the trail. It's the oldest ov the two, ye know. Play fair with her."

Thus advised, the ranger glanced at Rita and wheeled his horse.

"Come on," he said to her.

"Go ahead. I am at your heels."

With no further parley the man moved away, followed by Rita, who still retained her hold on the revolver, and whose eyes watched her guide so narrowly that not a movement of his escaped her notice.

More than two miles from the spot where she had encountered the two men, her guide halted and turned to her.

His horse stood at the edge of the little stream, whose waters glistened in the soft starlight. It was so narrow that the twain could see to the other side.

"We're on the trail. He crossed hyer," said the man. "Do you know the hoof-print ov the Bombshell's hoss?"

"Yes."

"Then git down an' look at the one in the ground yonde. Don't take my word fer it. I lie sometimes."

Rita dismounted and approached the water, with a lighted match in her hands.

More than once since the beginning of her hunt for Big Benson, she had examined the hoof-prints made by his steed, so that she was familiar with the mark.

In the soft earth, sloping to the water, were numerous horse-tracks; but one in particular, the imprint of a somewhat curious shoe, invited her gaze.

For several moments she examined it in the light of the match.

"You have not deceived me," she said, looking up into the Texan's face. "I have found Benson's trail at last. This time I will not leave it until my oath has been fulfilled."

The mounted ranger smiled incredulously.

"It's all owin' to what the boys do," he said.

Rita sprung up.

"The boys! They are to find Big Benson, are they?" she demanded. "He crossed this stream—I say for the last time. Tell your pard that when you go back to him."

She said no more, for she had mounted her

horse again, and the animal was clearing the waters of the Texas creek.

Once on the other side, she sent a loud cheer back to the dark apparition on the bank just left, and the next moment she galloped away.

Having found where Benson had crossed a certain stream, Rita seemed to know where to look for him.

On, on, she went, until the approach of day found a weary horse moving slowly along the edge of a belt of timber, with a young girl almost asleep in the saddle.

Suddenly she was aroused by the animal's sudden halt, and when she unclosed her heavy lids she saw what had startled her steed.

Not more than fifty yards ahead sat six men on as many horses.

They were roughly dressed fellows whose faces were like parchment in color, and, their heavy armament of rifle, revolver and bowie proclaimed their identity.

Rita hesitated not, but rode forward.

She was not molested, although the eyes of each man scrutinized her closely.

"I know you; you are from Coyote," she said, halting before the six. "Where is Big Benson's trail?"

"Nigher than you think, my love," said one of the dark fellows. "You ar' at the end ov it. We've caught the Texas devil."

A loud exclamation of surprise broke from Rita.

"Where is he, then?"

"Just back ov the timber whar the boys ar' sharpenin' their knives. We voted fer bahgin'. It isn't honorable ter skin a man alive, though Big Benson desaves worse ner thet. We wouldn't stay an' see the process."

"They shall not do it!"

Several of the men burst into fits of laughter.

"They've got under way ere this," said the spokesman.

"Make way for me!"

Rita urged her horse forward, but the animal was stopped by a bronze hand that clutched the bridle-rein.

"No. It's no place for a girl," said the ranger.

"Drop that rein!" was the flashing response, and the Texan recoiled from the revolver thrust into his face, and the next instant Romero's ward was shooting the wood like a thunderbolt.

CHAPTER XIV.

COYOTE WINS.

THE old localism that "when a Texan hunts a man the man is found," had been proven in this case.

While Rita was pushing down the trail discovered at the ford through the medium of the forced guide, the very man for whose neck her lasso was always ready, was riding slowly and confidently over a nice stretch of wild pasture-land.

If he knew the citizens of Coyote had deserted their cabins for the purpose of flaying him alive, he did not evince any fear, as he moved along at a gentle gallop, his horse's hoofs sending forth no sound in the grass they pressed.

"I'll win my bet yet," he said, aloud. "I wouldn't be ther Brazos Bombshell ef I failed ter outwit a girl an' beat Romero out ov his ranch. I'll take it, too, an' make it blossom like a rose inside ov six months. Red Crest may take a notion ter swoop down upon it, but he'll not carry off a feather. Why don't I strike a trail ov some kind? Hevn't seen one fer forty-eight hours. I must be nigh Moredo's creek. Ha! thar is the water now."

The clear, starlit waters of the little stream reached by the Brazos Bombshell were welcomed by his steed, which drank eagerly and for many moments.

Not until he had thoroughly quenched his thirst did he move on, and Big Benson started him into a smart gallop after emerging from the water.

"Hello! somethin's ahead!" suddenly exclaimed the Texas outlaw. "The boss sniffs somethin'. What is it, pard?"

The interrogative had scarcely been put ere the human wolf whipped out his two revolvers and leaned forward in a listening attitude.

All at once a long line of fire assailed his vision.

"Curse the man what struck thet match!" he grated, knowing well that the grass of the plain was burning afar in his front. "The Comanches are out on another raid an' what they can't carry off they burn."

Larger grew the flame as Big Benson watched it from the back of his horse, and his eyes flashed with resentment as he looked.

His practiced eye told him that the fire was sweeping toward him, although at that time it was yet at least four miles off.

A stiff breeze, enough to drive the flames forward with great rapidity, blew against his face, stirred his long black hair, and lifted the brim of his sombrero.

"The fire never caught me yet," he laughed. "This boss kin outrun any plain fire thet ever lit the sky. We'll let it get a little nigher, pard, an' then give it a tussle."

Straightening in his saddle Benson watched the approaching fire with much interest.

It was near enough to enable him to see the tongues of flame that leaped heavenward, and to hear the roar that went before it like cannon thundering against the wind.

The sight was terribly grand even to the Texas outlaw who had seen it before.

His own hands had fired the grass a score of times, and more than once he had put a wall of flame between himself and pursuing foes.

The Bombshell's horse did not long share his master's composure; he began to grow restless as the roaring flames advanced, eating up the grass and sending volumes of dark smoke toward the sky.

"Don't get fretful. I know yer powers," said Benson in a quieting strain as he patted the steed's arched neck. "We'll be off in a minute. By heavens! thar's a blaze behind us!"

This discovery, enough to pale the cheek of even a Texan, seemed to stagger the bronze lassoer.

Behind him was a line of fire similar to the one sweeping down in his front, but it was not

so near as the last mentioned and did not seem so dangerous.

After a short study of the second fire Big Benson wheeled his horse and rode toward it.

It was a perfect wall of flame too formidable to be charged with safety, and after a short inspection of it he turned and rode back again.

There was now on the desperado's face an expression of fierce determination, a resolve to outwit the fire or perish in the attempt.

The fire first discovered had been changed by the fickle wind into a sort of crescent, the horns of which were on his right and his left, and he seemed to be actually between them.

In almost less time than we have described Big Benson's situation, he seemed to be a doomed man.

The two fires would soon unite, for the one in his front, sweeping down with the wind, was roaring like a thousand ocean surges, and the heat of it had reached his face.

"Once in ther Pecos kentry we rode through a fire like thet!" he exclaimed. "You're ther boss what did thet trick, pard. You must do it ag'in."

The magnificent full-blood seemed to understand the Bombshell, and to gather strength for the ordeal.

Escape, if escape were now possible, lay ahead.

The fleetest horse in Texas could not outrun the flames, and no man knew that better than Burly Benson himself.

He had long since put up his revolvers; they could not fight fire successfully. He relied on his horse; if he failed, then all was lost.

Here and there for a moment appeared rifts in the fiery phalanx, and beyond lay the dark plain covered with burned grass and very hot to the touch.

Benson watched these places narrowly, measured their breath with his keen eyes, and calculated his chances.

Then he took his long hair, gathered it together, brought it around under his chin, and tied it there, lest in passing through the fiery lane it should get caught by the red tempest, and be destroyed.

"Ready now, horse," he said. "Remember that you carry the Brazos Bombshell, who has bet a woman's picter ag'in the best ranch in Texas. Thar's one ov them lanes ag'in. Shoot it straight! Go!"

The command was followed by a yell that rose above the roar of wind and flame, and the horse shot forward like an Indian arrow.

Benson fell forward on the steed's neck along which he put one of his arms and pressed the long mane close to keep it from catching in the fire.

The horse knew or seemed to know exactly what was expected of him.

He bent himself to the accomplishment of the terrible task with a zeal that commanded success.

A moment after his start he reached the mouth of the fire-walled lane which the hunted ruffian had selected for the attempt at escape.

The next instant horse and rider disappeared.

With teeth shut hard and determined visage, the Brazos Bombshell plunged into the fire and

clung to the horse to whom he had intrusted his life.

The heat was intolerable; he felt it on his cheeks; it seemed to shrivel his hand; the steed's mane, despite his precautions took fire.

This minute of peril, terror and horror which followed the bunted desperado's plunge cannot be described because the pen and brain cannot do it justice.

If the reader had stood beyond the fire on the blackened ground, he would have seen a horse emerge from the seething flames with a blazing mane which a man was trying to beat out.

Thanks to Benson's precaution he had saved his own long locks, but his sombrero had disappeared and his clothes were badly singed.

The steed's exertions bore him some distance beyond the fire, then a halt was made and a quiver, felt by the Texas tiger, passed through the horse's frame.

His own brain seemed in a whirl and no wonder; the heat through which he had passed was enough to burst his skull.

"Through it, by Heaven!" rose from his throat. "Hurrah fer ther Brazos Bombshell an' ther best piece ov boss meat in Texas! I always come out on top; I never fail! I've been in hot places, but never in one ez hot ez thet one back thar. Kerwhoop! kerwhoop! I could whip the world!"

The last boast was finished as his faithful horst staggered forward, and the next moment pitched headlong as though his front legs had given way.

Benson freed himself from the saddle ere the exhausted and dying creature struck the ground, and as he touched the blackened grass the fire-lit landscape whirled around him.

In vain he tried to steady himself and keep his feet. He clutched at the scorching atmosphere, but it did not sustain him.

All at once down he went, to rise again only to fall back with a mad oath.

Suddenly the gallop of approaching horses reached his ears, and then the voices of men—white men.

"My God! ther men ov Coyote!" cried Big Benson. "Don't I know now who sot ther grass afire! They want me for what I did at Coyote the other night. They would make me loose my bet with Romero."

He forced himself toward his horse, where his revolvers had fallen from his belt.

The tigerish glare in his eyes told how he would receive the horsemen almost at hand.

With a wild cry he snatched up the weapons and whirled upon his hunters.

The next second they bounded into view, sixteen stalwart Texans on horses that matched them well.

"I am hyer! Ther Brazos Bombshell explodes ag'in to yer cost, men ov Coyote!"

The speaker's blistered hands thrust the revolvers forward, and the four foremost Texans reeled almost simultaneously from their saddles.

But the deadly weapons did not check the mad Coyoters, who recognized Benson with a yell of delight.

They came on, and despite his mad resist-

ance, rode him down, to come back presently and pick him up a helpless captive.

Coyote had won.

CHAPTER XV.

DASHER'S REVOLVERS.

ONCE more we go back to the shanty among the trees that once almost hid the finest hacienda in Texas—Romero's.

While Benson was fighting fire, and Rita hurrying along his trail, there stood in front of the uncouth structure the old rancher himself, with eyes gazing longingly toward the north as though from that point of the compass he expected his beautiful ward.

"Benson will lose his bet—I know it!" he exclaimed. "He will never ride beside Rita to my ranch, and she will never willingly tell me that she loves him. That would be too much. What! Rita the wife of the man she has sworn to hunt to earth? Never! Heaven has no such misery in store for Romero."

Behind the rancher lay the blackened ruins of his hacienda, and more than once he had promised himself to erect another that would outshine the old place, but not till Rita came back to lay the fatal lasso at his feet, and tell him that the terror of the Texas border was no more.

All at once from out the darkness that rose like a wall of night before him, came a horse that stopped at the door of the shanty.

Romero sprung forward with a cry of joy.

"Dasher! thank fortune!" he exclaimed. "I have been waiting for some one. You have come. I am glad."

The youth leaned down and gazed searchingly into Romero's face.

It was such a look as he had never given him before.

"Where is Montef?" asked the rancher.

"Dead."

The answer seemed to stagger Romero.

"Not dead? Then—" He checked himself and clutched the boy's arm. "Did he tell you anything before he died?"

"Yes."

"Get down and tell me all."

Dasher hardly waited for these words.

He was on the ground before they left the rancher's lips.

"He told me a secret he had kept for years," the boy went on. "He gave me proof of what he said, but that proof, alas! I have lost."

"Was it a locket?"

Before Dasher could reply a number of arrows cut the air, and the rancher threw up his hands with a cry and fell across the threshold of his little shanty.

"Indians!" ejaculated Dasher, turning toward the point from whence the feathered shafts had come. "You do not know who you have slain, red devils; but I will show you."

He saw nothing for a moment, but suddenly the air resounded with the wildest yells, and a score of naked figures leaped from the grass in his front and rushed forward.

Dasher had already drawn a pair of revolvers, and he now poured their contents into the redskins.

Stunned by this unexpected reception where

they had looked for an easy victory, the redskins appeared to recoil, and taking advantage of their momentary terror the youth sprung into the shanty and drew Romero's body further inside.

"Tell me that you live, Romero—father!" he said, stooping over the rancher.

There was no reply.

"Woe to the Comanches if they have killed you!" he flashed, rising and leaping to the door, revolvers in hand. "Since I have found my father, I shall avenge him, or die by his side."

Dasher looked out upon the starlit plain in front of the building, and saw only the motionless forms of the Indians who had fallen before his weapons; their living comrades had gone back to the shelter of the grass through which they had sneaked upon the twain.

But he knew they had not given up the contest, and while he stood at the door, burning for them to renew the fight, he expected to hear the whiz of an arrow or the ping of a bullet.

He listened, too, for a groan from the man behind, for a gasp that would tell him that Romero still lived; but he listened in vain.

At the end of five minutes there came a voice from the waving grass.

"The Comanches are many. Red Crest leads them. Will the white boy try to hold out against them?"

"Yes," was the quick response. "Red Crest, there can be no peace between us."

"White boy stands between the Comanches and the Texas Rose. She is in the rancher's hut; she has escaped from Red Crest the second time. Give her up and the Comanche will go back to his lodge."

A smile flitted across Dasher's face.

"Rita has escaped from him again. Thank Heaven for that good news!" he exclaimed. "Now I can fight these red devils with better muscle than ever. They think Rita is here; I will not undeceive them. Since they have killed Romero, I want the blood of every one!"

He went back to the rancher and snatched his revolvers from his belt; then he returned to the door, with twenty-four loaded chambers for the skulkers in the grass.

"What does the white boy say? Red Crest is like the wild horse. He wants to be off to his people. Give him the Texas Rose, and he will go."

"You go without her, or stay here forever," said Dasher, fearlessly. "Red Crest and his Comanches are cowards. They stay hid in the grass, like snakes. They dare not lift their heads."

"Boy find out soon. Him no give Texas Rose up?"

"Once forever, no!"

A minute's silence followed this thrilling ultimatum, then the air was pierced by a blood-chilling whoop.

"I've stirred them up," said the boy, to himself, and sure enough he had.

The next instant half a dozen figures sprung up from the grass, and half of them at least fell back again at three shots that seemed to have been fired at the same moment.

"You have only to come on to find out that

there is Romero blood in my veins!" the boy exclaimed, defiantly, as he poured his deadly fire into the Comanche ranks. "Monte taught me how to shoot. I practiced on Indians under his eye, and I guess I remember the old lessons. Come on, miserable red skunks. I've got a bullet for each one of you."

To charge successfully in the face of such a terrible fire as the youth was delivering was next to an impossibility.

Dasher's revolvers spoke with a continual flash which threw a weird light upon his face revealing his determined eyes and close-shut lips.

One of the Indians fell almost at his very feet, but they got no nearer.

Dasher stepped back into the cabin without seeing a single Comanche in arms before him.

There came no parley from the grass, no yells of defiance.

He knew he had not killed all for he had seen some retreat unburt.

The boy reloaded his revolvers and waited for the third onslaught, but it did not come.

More than an hour passed away.

At last he saw one of the dead bodies recede as though it was being dragged away by some person behind it.

"Got enough of it, have you?" murmured Dasher. "Well, depart in peace if you will, and keep your distance hereafter. I'm inclined to be dangerous when you stir me up."

One by one the corpses of the fallen were dragged through the grass.

Dasher did not molest the Comanches in this work, but permitted them to reclaim their dead, and saw the victims of his revolvers taken away.

After several hours of sleepless vigil at the door, the boy from Coyote crept back to the spot where he had left Romero.

To his surprise he did not find the rancher there.

What had become of him?

A search of the shanty instantly took place, and in one corner Dasher's hand came in contact with a human face.

A low cry followed the touch.

"Alive!" cried the youth joyously, and forgetful of the red-skinned foes that might lurk in the grass, he threw himself upon the person he had discovered.

"I don't want the proof you have lost!" cried Romero as his arms encircled Dasher. "You have told me enough of Monte's secret. I know who you are—my boy!"

What an opportunity for Comanche vengeance that moment presented.

"Draw this accursed arrow out of my bosom, Chester," said Romero; "and we will see that Big Benson loses his bet. We will help Rita fulfill her oath."

The beautiful queen of the lasso needed no help.

At that very moment, while there was rejoicing in Romero's shanty, she was uncoiling the long lasso for the last throw.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST THROW OF THE LASSO.

"Now thet you've got ther Brazos Bombshell, what ar' ye goin' ter do with 'im?"

"What d'ye s'pose, Brazos? Don't think we ar' goin' ter let ye slip through our fingers, eh?"

"Wal, not exactly. But, ov course, you'll give me a chance."

"Yes, ther kind Monte got from ye at Coyote."

To this last response there was no answer.

The Brazos Bombshell was the prisoner of the men from Coyote, the stalwart Avengers of the Texas border, and men from whom he had no reason to expect any mercy.

We have seen him fall into their hands after the prairie fire which those very men had started for the purpose of "stirring him up" if he was near at hand.

Their efforts had been crowned with the greatest success desirable; the Bombshell had fallen into their hands.

The camp of the Coyoters was near a belt of timber, and there they intended to inflict on their captive a punishment the mere mention of which makes one shudder.

He had infested the borders long enough; he had bullied Coyote once too often.

The cowards of the Texas town had united against him; he had stirred their blood at last.

After the brief conversation recorded at the head of this chapter, the Avengers, as the Coyotes called themselves, prepared to put an end to the Bombshell's career.

A few of them had voted for hanging, but the majority decided in favor of that terrible torture which we call flaying alive.

Several of those who had declared for hanging denounced the sentence inhuman, and, rather than witness the punishment, mounted their horses and rode off.

"Git ready, Brazos," ordered the leader of the bronze executioners.

"I'm always ready. When did ther Bombshell shrink?"

They stood around him with knives drawn, and with revolvers cocked in their leathern belts.

He had been taken from the horse and placed on the ground, and the looks that he fixed on the party were full of defiance.

"Hark!" suddenly said one of the men. "Somebody's comin'."

"Comin' through the timber, too. Mebbe the boys ar' comin' back?"

No, it was not "the boys," as was soon discovered, for all at once a horse and his rider emerged from the wood, and the next moment the astonished Coyoters were looking up into the face of Rita!

"That man belongs to me," she said, pointing at Big Benson.

"To you, girl?" ejaculated several of the border pards in unison.

"To me."

"I'd like to know how!"

"By the conditions of my oath. You must not touch him with those knives."

"Just ez ef we haven't a right ter do ez we please!"

"Not with my property."

"Ho! ef you sit thar an' look on awhile you shall see."

The girl's eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

"I am not here to parley, but to act," she

said, facing the leaders boldly. "Let that man up!"

"Onto his feet?"

"Yes."

"By heavens, ye're askin' too much! We can't do that, girl!"

"Can't, did you say? You *shall*!"

Quick as a flash the rancher's ward thrust forward the revolver she clutched.

"Step back! I'll shoot the first man who hesitates! I don't want to shed a single Coyote's blood, but I must be obeyed. I'll count five. One—two—"

Rita counted no further, for every man, menaced by her revolver, and the stern eyes behind it, had stepped back, and the Brazos Bombshell was beyond the reach of every arm.

"Who's got a horse to sell?" asked the girl, addressing the crowd.

No one spoke.

Rita threw a glance toward the little group of horses a few feet away.

"Go out there and pick your horse," she said to Big Benson.

"He sha'n't do that! It's carryin' the joke too far," declared one of the Texas pards.

"Silence! I hold the winning hand just now! I'm liable to press the trigger of my revolver at any moment. Pick out your horse, Benson."

The Bombshell looked at her to see whether she was in earnest, and then started forward.

"He'll git away! You ar' helpin' him off, girl?"

"What have I told you? He belongs to me!"

By this time, with triumph springing up in the depths of his eyes, Benson was moving toward the horses.

The fire had singed him terribly, all but his long black hair, but his step was as elastic as if he expected to achieve another victory over the men from Coyote.

Rita watched him with an eagerness that made her eyes glitter.

Not one movement of his escaped her.

All at once, when near the horses, Big Benson leaped forward with an exclamation of joy.

The Coyoters saw him spring upon the back of the best horse in the group, and as a shout of rage burst from the owner of the steed, a piercing yell rose from the desperado's lips.

"We'll meet ag'in', thanks to the gal!" he exclaimed, turning upon the Coyoters for a moment. "I'm still the Brazos Bombshell! I'll live ter explode more than once in Coyote. Men of Texas, border bums!"

Then he wheeled the horse, a noble black, and while the coyoters beard with clinched teeth, he went off like a rocket, his last mad yell of defiance ringing in their ears.

"That beats thunder!" grated the men left behind. "Mount an' foller him. He shall not git away, ef he has a good start!"

"You ride behind me, then!" cried the girl, and an instant later she had put up the revolver and was flying after Benson, her hand on the black lasso coiled against her saddle.

"I gave him a chance for his life," she said aloud, as she urged her horse after her enemy flying across the burnt plain at the best speed his steed was capable of making. "If I miss

him to-day, may the spirit of my sainted mother turn from me, forever!"

From the first it was a wild, exciting race for life.

Unarmed as he was, Big Burly Benson, the man of many crimes, had to depend upon the horse he had selected from those belonging to the Coyoters.

The first mile told him that he had made a good choice, for the steed possessed excellent bottom, and seemed to realize that he was carrying a man from his bitterest foe.

But Rita's horse bore her nobly on.

She watched the big ruffian with unwearied look, and her eager eyes constantly measured the space between them.

The horses, whose feet scarcely seemed to touch the ground they moved over, were almost equally matched.

The Brazos Bombshell held an advantage by the start he had obtained.

"I'll git away this time an' turn on the Texas daisy by an' by," he murmured. "I'll win my bet with Romero after all, though affairs did hev a scaly look just afore the gal dashed through the timber. Come on, my perairy pink!" he sent back over his shoulder. "When you noose ther Bombshell o' Brazos thar'll be fun in Texas!"

Rita made no response, but her eyes seemed to receive a new glitter as she kept on.

At length there was a perceptible lessening of the distance between the two.

Romero's ward had urged her steed to his very utmost, and the lasso hung no longer from its accustomed place, but the coil dangled from the girl's white hand.

"I have him now, or never!" she suddenly exclaimed as she arose and began to swing the black noose above her head.

The two horses were doing their level best.

All at once the lasso left Rita's hand, and a wild cry rose from Big Benson's throat as the avenging lariat fell over his head, and the next moment he was jerked from the horse which went on without him!

Big Benson had lost his bet.

"At last!" cried Rita. "Mother, all the past is avenged. The black lasso has avenged us all!"

She wheeled her horse with a practiced hand, and rode back toward the Coyoters' camp.

She looked not once behind; she knew who was being dragged over the burned grass at her horse's heels.

There was mad triumph in her eyes, and when she drew rein it was to find herself surrounded by a lot of swarthy men, whose looks were questions.

"I caught him!" she said, proudly facing them all. "Men of Coyote, the Brazos Bombshell was doomed to this nine years ago. My father is avenged!"

The Coyoters stared at her as she rode off, and not a hand was put forth to arrest her progress.

"She's a brick!" suddenly exclaimed one.

"When she told us that Big Benson belonged to her, I saw by her eyes that she meant ter ketch 'im."

A few hours afterward a beautiful girl

stopped a horse in front of a little shanty among some trees.

"Back at last!" exclaimed the fine-looking man who came out to greet her.

"Yes, Romero, I am back. The schooling under your eye did not fail me," and a black lasso fell at the rancher's feet.

But that was not all.

Rita placed in Romero's hands a gold locket which was quickly opened, and the gentle face therein covered with kisses.

"Big Benson lost his bet. I knew he would!" exclaimed Romero. "Dasher will be here presently."

And Dasher came.

He led Rita to one side, and talked low for a few moments.

Romero saw the girl blush; he knew what was said.

The oath had been fulfilled, and Rita was at liberty to think of love.

Did she do so? asks the reader.

We answer by saying that where the old ranch had stood another and a finer hacienda rose, and the first event that took place within its walls was a wedding to which all Western Texas came, including the entire population of Coyote.

Red Crest, the young war chief of the Comanches, molested the border no more, for he was among those who fell before Dasher's revolver in his spirited defense of his wounded father.

Romero's ranch is no longer castleless, but hundreds of Texan steers dot its broad pastures, and the full-bloods scour its plains with all the abandon of wild life.

And Rita, a little older but fairer than ever, has not forgotten how to cast a lariat.

So they say.

THE END.

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